

Sensual Culture: The Socio-Sensual Practices of Clubbing.

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**THESIS
CONTAINS
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Abstract

This study examines the world of clubbing when viewed as a holistic field of socio-sensual practice. Over the course of this study I observed a consistent form of bodily practice, occurring in clubs, that had initially appeared very different from one another. This practice made these clubs more similar to one another than different and this socio-sensual similarity became the focus of this study. In order to examine this aspect of clubbing I have utilised a number of theoretical frameworks, that arose from a series of disparate fields, but which are still connected. From anthropology and sociology I have drawn upon the work of Pierre Bourdieu, Marcel Mauss, Michael Foucault, Norbert Elias and Chris Shilling. From Philosophy I have utilised the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson. From neuro-cognitive studies I was strongly influenced by the work of Antonio Damasio and Joseph LeDoux. These alternate perspectives consolidate one another's assertions, as to the nature of this experiential encounter, and I have used them to provide a connective thread across the realm of clubbing.

Nevertheless the vast bulk of theoretical material in this work is derived from observing and participating in club nights and interviewing clubbers, both at a formal and informal level. This has created a study which explores two aspects of the club scene. The first arises from the actual practice of clubbing: what people experience, how it affects them, what they make of it, and it is grounded in an ethnographic analysis of the space. The second is a theory of sensuality, which is also derived from observations of the club space and is grounded in an examination of the way in which people experience and give meaning to their worlds through the sensual practice of inhabiting that world.

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Introduction

“Born on a dance floor as a natural groove craver.” DubWar

I was drawn to the club scene for a number of reasons. Firstly, I have a passion for each of the elements that make up a club: the party sociality, the music, the intoxication and the dancing. Each have played important roles in the way I personally have constructed and experienced my own social world. However, I was not a fulltime clubber at the beginning of this study; I have been going to clubs since I was 16, which gives me 18 years experience of clubbing, but this experience had been sporadic. My initial forays into clubland took place before the arrival of ecstasy, which played a huge role in revitalising and reconstructing the club space as a social environment. Over the years I have dipped into clubbing at various points in my life, rather than being a hardcore clubber. I had seen enough of clubs to witness the changes that occurred in them over the years, but it was the decision to begin this study which pushed me further into the realm of clubbing and consolidated my passion and attachment to clubs, as important social spaces where you could have big fun.

My engagement with the space, although limited, still gave me enough knowledge of clubs to provide a more long term perspective on clubbing, than other studies of the space have utilised. I can still remember when clubs were predominantly late night drinking dens, when the sociality they housed was simply a “pissed up” version of the everyday world, rather than anything radically different. I witnessed the changes that came along with the arrival of ecstasy. I saw the ecstasy comedown after people’s initial enthusiasm and belief in the drug waned. I had seen the return of cocaine and booze. I had seen the splintering of clubland from large scale raves to smaller social settings and the gradual commercialisation of the scene; its incorporation in the realm of capital, which made it a mainstream leisure option. I had witnessed these changes and I brought that knowledge to the contemporary club space, as I found it, when I began my fieldwork in 1997. I must point out that this study was based in London’s clubland.

From an academic perspective my interest in clubbing was fuelled by an absence of work in anthropology that dealt directly with human social pleasure. Sensual pleasure was treated with disdain or suspicion within anthropology, more often viewed as a problem than an important field of social action which people valued. This perspective mirrored the way in which our own society viewed specific forms of pleasurable activity, particularly the

pleasures of the flesh: intoxication, sex, even dancing, all of which play an important role in clubbing, were coated with a balm of suspicion, that arose from the moral and medical discourses through which society attempted to control them.

The Christian and especially Protestant view of pleasure treated it with profound mistrust, pleasure was of the devil, it drew people away from god and work and so had to be vigorously controlled. Clubbing is almost the polar opposite of such a perspective and, as such, I will argue that it is a field of practice which has played a role in re-orientating people's perspective upon and experience of pleasure. Pleasure is becoming more significant as a reference point in people's lives and, contrary to the assertions of post-modern theorists, the body itself is becoming the most important site for the construction and maintenance of knowledge about the world; a hypothesis I will expand upon throughout this study.

The realm of clubbing has been predominantly viewed from within the field of youth studies, but the pathways, I followed, challenged this assumption. My informants were not youths; they ranged in age from their mid 20s to their late 50s; the oldest person I came across in a night-club was 82; the informants with whom I carried out the longest and most in depth interviews were aged between 25 and 55 and had been clubbing for some years. This opened up the process of clubbing to examination, because the way in which my informants clubbed, what they set out to experience and how those experiences were assessed had changed over time. Again this added a more historical dimension to the study, that allowed me to explore the way club novices and older club hands experienced the club space and how those experiences, and the perspective people had upon them, had also changed. My study examines clubs as adult, rather than youth arenas, and it explores the effect that clubbing has had upon these adults outlook on their world and experience of their own lives and the wider social world in which those lives are lived.

I have also explored a wider variety of clubbing styles than any other examination of the club space. From Trance clubs to Hip-Hop venues, Dress Up gigs and Fetish clubs, Queer clubs and Straight clubs, Asian clubs, Techno nights, House clubs, Drum n Bass gigs, Soul nights, Funk nights, Tranny clubs, Free parties and Illicit Sexual Soirees. This diversity made the study radically different from any of the other investigations into clubbing, which have focused on younger crowds in mainly dance and ecstasy orientated environments. It allowed me to explore both the differences and similarities between these spaces. Through focusing on the diversity of the club scene I came across a number of different perspectives upon and styles of clubbing, all of which were linked through the actual experiences that the

club space housed. These experiences all bore something in common, namely they were grounded in the intensification of people's sensual experience of their world, within a social environment, that was, itself, altered by the presence of this sensual intensity. These social and sensual factors provide the foundation upon which I have set out to construct a theory of sensual practice, that allows me to more fully explore and account for the experiences held in the club arena than any of the theoretical frameworks, which have previously been utilised to examine this social field. This perspective arose from and was then applied back to my clubbing data. However, this theoretical position also utilises insights from a variety of academic sources, some of which I discovered prior to my fieldwork period and others which I was led to while struggling with my data. I was determined to focus first and foremost on the data that arose from clubbing alongside and talking to other clubbers. I considered them as the experts; they gave me the theories which I then backed up by looking at other academic fields, which seemed to overlap with their ideas, beliefs and experiences of clubbing. I did not want to bring any pre-set academic theory to bear upon clubbing, because nothing I encountered seemed up to the task and it was only by combining a variety of disparate theoretical perspectives, from different disciplines, that I felt I could unravel the world of clubs. It was through pulling these alternative theoretical perspectives together, that I managed to create a theoretical framework, that could account for the diversity of the club scene and the experiences it housed.

In the following section I want to lay out the various theoretical viewpoints which have informed this study and the way in which I have used them to increase my understanding of the club space.

Academic Clubbing

There have been a number of academic investigations into the club scene, each of which have been carried out at various stages in the construction of the contemporary club space that I entered in 1998. The major texts have utilised vastly disparate theoretical perspectives, with each focusing on a different aspect or aspects of clubbing, so by examining these texts as a whole body of work, supposedly arising from the same phenomena, I was left more confused than informed, because each takes such a entirely different stance from the other. However, clubbing has changed radically over the last 17 years and each of the major clubbing texts have arisen from different stages during this process of change, which can account for at least some of these differences. The

perspectives, which arose in the early days of raving, best illustrated in the work of the Manchester School of Popular Culture, through the collections of essays edited by Steve Redhead, tended to stress “resistance” and “hedonism for hard times”. A perspective that arose from within the social and economic climate of the time, but which no longer applies to much of the contemporary club scene. The club experience itself was consistently examined from within a theoretical framework constructed by Jean Baudrillard (1987, 1988). I found this perspective too disembodied to help me with my own material, which focuses upon the social and sensual knowledge that was housed in the club space. Clubs are more sensuous than symbolic, but from this particular academic perspective the body is viewed as a void, a place of non-meaning, as the quote by Rietveld below shows. Yet my own work will show that this is a fallacious supposition and that the body holds, constructs and maintains a sense of meaningfulness in the world which can exist outside of symbolic or ideological processes. There is however some interesting ideas in this work. Redhead (1993) captures the media’s changing perspective upon and gradual problematisation of the early rave scene. Patrick Mignon (1993) charts the process of democratising a “bohemian” lifestyle, but focuses on the symbolic manifestation of this “bohemian” realm, whereas I have concentrated on its “bodily techniques” and its social practices.

Hillegonda Rietveld (1993) claims that:

“It could be argued that the use of a dance-drug like ‘Ecstasy’ in a rave environment makes one ‘return’ to a stage in psychological development which is before the acquisition of language, thereby undoing the self that is constituted in and by language and in and by its constructed discourse. A break is caused with the established symbolic order at a basic level, however temporary....In this case there was a surrender to a complete void of meaning, rather than some form of resistance” (Hillegonda Rietveld in Redhead Ed: 1993:65)

Whereas one of my informants said:

“Ecstasy loosens your tongue more than anything else, the side effects of getting into the music and dancing are great but they’re not essential for a good E hit.” (Male 26: 8 years experience.)

This disparity is interesting because Rietveld reduces the self to language and discourse and this study will show why such an assertion is un-justifiable. Emotions have never been fully accountable through language, so this is not simply a property of taking ecstasy. Unlike sign-signifier relations that are, according to Saussure, arbitrary the language of emotion must instil empathetic equivalencies, if it is to be comprehended. Ecstasy alters language but it certainly doesn’t obliterate it; people talk a lot in clubs they just talk about different things

in altered ways. In my analysis it is the bodily order of the “habitus”, which underpins the symbolic realm, that is altered by clubbing. This can manifest itself as a break with the symbolic order but doesn’t necessarily have to in order to generate particular forms of socio-sensual experience that exert their own influences on clubbers at a sub-symbolic level.

Clubs can both challenge or confirm a number of symbolic postures in the world but it is the actuality of clubbing’s practice which underpins this potentiality. The perspective of the Manchester School largely reduces clubbing to the points of “blissed out” immersion people undergo on the dancefloor, when they are examining the actual experience of clubbing. This is an important part of clubbing but it is, itself, built upon smaller more incremental, but no less important shifts in socio-sensual practice, that allows these “blissed up” states to arise within the crowd. I have focused on these less dramatic socio-sensual shifts and placed them at the forefront of my analysis, because I believe it offers a simpler and more direct interpretation of the practices of clubbing and their on-going effect upon punters than the theoretical perspective of Jean Baudrillard as it was utilised within this body of work.

A further study was undertaken by Sarah Thornton in “*Club Cultures: Music, Media and Subcultural Capital*.” (1994) wherein she utilised Bourdieu’s theory of distinction and sub-cultural capital to examine the way in which clubbers articulate notions of hipness and belonging within the overall field of club goers. This challenges the view that clubbers can be examined as a mass movement who are all part of one identificatory group, though this shift in clubbers identification with other clubbers, is itself part of clubbing’s gradual incorporation into the leisure industry. Her hypothesis explores notions of “distinction”, amongst clubbers, that are articulated through their musical and stylistic allegiances, which generate and constrain notions of authenticity, through the creation of a cutting edge of club based knowledge. Where to go, what to listen to, how to dress become alternative systems of social knowledge, that create boundaries and identificational groupings across the field of nightlife. These groupings link into a wider set of social, economic, gender and ethnic categories that all play a role in the choice of particular club spaces and the forms of experience they set out to offer.

Although I am largely sympathetic to Thornton’s analysis, which goes some way in examining the complexity of the relationship between the inside and outside of the club environment, I believe that she has failed to give any useful account of the experience of clubbing itself, particularly in relation to the styles of bodily practice and the forms of social interaction, that the club space both generates and constrains and which underpin the experience of clubbing, once all the choices charted by Thornton have been made.

Therefore I have found little in her work that bears directly upon my own study and see it as a complementary field of analysis to my own theoretical perspective.

The nearest piece of work to my own is found in Ben Malbon's "*Clubbing: Dancing, Ecstasy and Vitality*." (1999). This focuses on the fleshy dynamics of the club experience itself and utilises a number of theoretical perspectives in an attempt to grasp clubbing's tiger's tail. Again, I am sympathetic to his analysis; yet his work seems strangely fractured because he utilises a plethora of disparate theoretical positions to examine the experiences people had in the club space without ever linking these experiences together and it makes no attempt to explore the relationship between the club space and the everyday world in which it is set. There is little focus on the actualities of social practice, which makes up a hugely important part of the club experience, and in the end he seems to focus on the same point of "blissed out", or in his terms "oceanic experience", that captured the attention of the Manchester school, as being the reason for clubbing. Yet, by examining a far wider field of clubs, I came across alternative types of "blissed out" state; I encountered many other aspects of the club experience, which were more important to my informants than the quick dip into the "oceanic" state stressed by Malbon. More critically, he sees this "oceanic" state as a property of the drugs and dancing, but it is my contention that the most important element in creating this "oceanic" state is the social vibe of the crowd, that underpins these experiences of drugging and dancing.

Clubs have to be created night after night by the promoters who set them up and more importantly by the crowd who occupy them. Malbon's analysis focuses on clubs that are in full flow, but I spent countless nights getting to clubs before anyone else and watching the way in which the crowd set about creating the club experience over the course of the night. The changes in the social interactions of the crowd, that is the social vibe that they were attempting to bring into being, were consistently viewed by my informants as the most important aspect of clubbing. Yet Malbon focuses on an experience which last only minutes and may not even happen at all. He touches upon a number of different aspects of clubbing: the playfulness, the sense of energetic vitality, notions of coolness and distinction, but does not bring these aspects of clubbing together into a more holistic perspective, that shows how each of the disparate elements he examines play into and off one another via the way they are manifested through the body of the crowd. So, although he mentions both playfulness and notions of identity he fails to explore how that playfulness can create alternate identities, experiments in the expression of self, that are kept from being taken too seriously, because the club space itself stops them being over denominated as expressive

forms. I have attempted to explore this holistic dimension to show how the various elements of clubbing rebound off one another and the forms of experience this holism underpins for punters.

My own starting point began with a simple contention that arose out of the work of Merleau-Ponty namely that human perception arises out of and is always part of their on-going immersion in the world, so as Merleau-Ponty points out:

“When we say that the perceived thing is to be grasped ‘in person’ or ‘in the flesh,’ this is to be taken literally.” (Merleau-Ponty quoted in Cataldi: 1993:1)

People are always in-the-world and their perception or consciousness of that world cannot be separated from this visceral and fleshy connectivity. This assertion challenges the notion that philosophical and ideological positions can be seen as transcendent phenomena. To quote Michael Jackson:

“The unifying assumption of the phenomenology outlined here is that philosophies and theories, like political opinions, should be regarded as part and parcel of the world in which we live rather than transcendent views that somehow escape the impress of our social interests, cultural habits, and personnel persuasions.” (Jackson 1996:1)

Merleau-Ponty’s work was a source of inspiration, but this is not a strictly phenomenological study; it utilises elements of phenomenology, but blends them with a number of other theoretical positions and cross-references these perspectives. The most important addition I have made to Merleau-Ponty’s work arises from the neuro-cognitive studies of Antonio Damasio. For me, Damasio and Merleau-Ponty share the same object of study, which is an examination of the body’s presence in the mind. Damasio though has focused more intensely on the role played by emotion in creating this corporeal presence and it was the emotional properties of the club space that instantly caught my eye. Clubs struck me as spaces that were emotionally and socially fluid and the two aspects of the club space could not be detached from one another. Merleau-Ponty himself makes little mention of the emotions, as ways of knowing the world, yet for me an understanding of the emotions is absolutely essential in comprehending our experience of being-in-the-world.

I perceive of our emotions as dynamic forces that can radically alter our experience of self in world. They provide a point of passionate connection to that world and imbue it with a specific “flavour” or “colour”, that is experienced as a style of energised posture and attitude in and towards that world. In terms of clubbing, the world that you’re in is intensely social and the people who occupy it provide the most important emotional marker for the event.

The “vibe” of a club is written upon the body of the crowd and those bodies change radically over the course of the club night. This alteration has direct social effects, which in turn reflects back upon the bodies of clubbers. This is a practical hermeneutics grounded in the practice of clubbing it is sensual, social and seductive.

Clubs offer a very different emotional experience of self, the world and other people, for punters, in comparison to the way they negotiate and feel in their everyday lives. This variance arises from alterations in an individual’s sense of self, that is manifested as a bodily form, that has deeply seductive qualities, which in turn alters the social nature of the space. This is the main reason I have used the terms sensual and socio-sensual, throughout this study, because to me it captures the seductive qualities that deeply embodied states can have, which in turn grants them social force.

People are willingly seduced into clubbing once they are in the club. Their intention is to go out and have a good time with their mates, but this intention alone will not make a club happen it must be backed up through the actual practice of clubbing, that gradually draws people deeper into the socio-sensual experience of clubbing itself. So right at the beginning of a club night clubs are fairly muted, but as the night goes on they grow in intensity as the crowd begins to occupy the space and reveal their passion for that space, which unleashes its own seductive force. The seductive qualities of the body have largely been left out of the various theories that surround that body. Yet the power of seduction as both an internal property of the self and a social force underpins a number of individual and social experiences, that are sensed as points of connection between self and world. In terms of people this seductive force can be both intended and unintended; it is property of the flesh as an object in the world and one of the more interesting social aspects of clubbing is the way in which the sociality of clubs has altered to incorporate this sensual and seductive potency. They are spaces in which the sensual properties of the flesh can be given far greater expression through a radical alteration in the sensual parameters tolerated by the crowds within the spaces themselves.

Damasio has constructed a three tier model of consciousness in which he suggests that the root of consciousness lies in a structure which he identifies as the proto-self. The proto-self is the map of the body, which is held in the brain, and which Damasio suggests provides the glutinous and fleshy point of reference for consciousness in world. So as we pass through our world we encounter an on-going series of “objects”, that constantly modify the proto-self. These sensual modifications provide the object, upon which consciousness reflects, the core pulse of energy, that is registered as the reflective plane from which consciousness

arises. This pulse creates core consciousness and subsequently our autobiographical or extended consciousness. We are not conscious of the proto-self; only in exceptional circumstances can people actively modify their own proto-self through conscious will alone. Nevertheless, it is a physical structure, so it is manipulable through the body by creating alternate bodies, by adopting different bodily practices, by becoming intoxicated, by experiencing disparate social forms we alter the proto-self and therefore we restructure the point from which conscious reflection upon the world arises. This is an altered-state of consciousness which, in the case of clubbing, is not simply an individual experience, because it generates altered-states of sociality. Clubbing is an especially pertinent example of this process, because it utilises a number of sensual and seductive forms to bring this sociality into being. It is an arena in which multiple sensual connections are created; occasionally becoming so intense that it is experienced as a point of sensory overload. This theoretical perspective added an extra dimension to Merleau-Ponty's notion of being in the world. We are always in the world but sometimes the world is so intensely in us, so immediate, viscous and seductive that this point of connection is intensified to become an experience of sublime immersion. This sense of immersion arises from the practice of clubbing; it is extremely difficult to think your way into the participatory realm housed in the club space; you have to occupy the space and allow it to occupy you in return. The practice of clubbing has a logic of its own, which brings me to a further point of theory which arises from the work of Pierre Bourdieu, who suggested that any examination of bodily and social practice needs to bear in mind:

“The idea of practical logic, a ‘logic in itself’, without conscious reflection or logical control, is a contradiction in terms, which defies logical logic. This paradoxical logic is that of all practice, or rather all practical sense.....This logic which, like all practical logics, can only be grasped in action, in the temporal movement that disguises it by detemporalizing it, sets the analyst a difficult problem, which can only be solved by recourse to a theory of theoretical logic and practical logic. The professional dealers in *logos* want practice to express something that can be experienced in discourse, preferably logical.” (Bourdieu 1990:92)

The logic of clubbing is a sensual logic held within the immediacy and intensity of the experience. It is a logic given saliency by the body of clubbers, which is experienced as a particular way of being-in-the-world with other people, that draws its power from the different socio-sensual states that clubbers experience, within the club space, in comparison to the way they experience the socio-sensual realm, that exists beyond its walls. This inside-outside opposition is important to clubbing; it is a point of sensual tension from which

clubbing draws its power. In order to understand this point of tension I needed a theoretical framework that was grounded in the body, but which examined the role social worlds played in constructing that body.

I was therefore drawn to Bourdieu's notions of "habitus". Bourdieu makes a link between the forms of bodily techniques and bodily practice, which a society instils into its occupants, and that society's ideological perspectives, which become embodied as both individual and group forms of practice. In Bourdieu's own terms:

"The conditionings associated with a particular class of conditions of existence produce *habitus*, systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organise practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain them." (Bourdieu 1990:53)

The body is imbued with a set of postures, attitudes and emotional relations to the world from very early childhood. These bodily phenomena are part of a person's sensed experience of being-in-the-world, that carry within them connections to the society's system of belief. So in the Kabyle society examined by Bourdieu, ideas about masculinity were manifested as a particularly manly set of bodily practices. So as Bourdieu explains:

"In the use of the mouth: a man should eat with his whole mouth, wholeheartedly, and not, like women, just with the lips, that is, half-heartedly, with reservation and restraint...Then in rhythm: a man of honour must eat neither too quickly, with greed or gluttony, nor too slowly-either way is a concession to nature." (Ibid.:70)

Through the adoption of these bodily practices, often via the process of mimesis and backed up by the occasional correction or punishment, men learn to behave like men, to both experience themselves as men and to express their masculinity to others. Women's bodily practice in Kabyle society is constructed in opposition to men, which creates two alternate forms of body, two ways of being-in-the-world, that, in this specific example, mirrors this society's ideas about gender. All societies create these bodily forms; the factors that determine their structure will reflect the hierarchy of the society, its economic disparities, notions of religious faith and other structures of distinction which operate in the social realm. For the sake of clarity I use the term *habitus* throughout this work but we must realise that in contemporary metropolitan terms we are actually talking about 'habiti' multiple variations of the *habitus* that reflect class distinctions, ethnicity, gender and age. However I use the term *habitus* because I believe the socio-sensual experiences offered in the club environment

throw the habitus into relief and make it's "structuring structure" visible regardless of which particular habitus a person possesses.

One of the problems with Bourdieu's theory of habitus is its inability to explain change. The bodily structures of habitus would seem to exert such a level of sub-conscious control over social agents, that it roots them consistently into a specific set of taken for granted assumptions that govern their social encounters. Yet in the club environment people valued the fact that they interacted with people differently; the taken for granted ideas that governed these interactions were radically altered, usually for the better, in that people displayed a more positive and open attitude to these encounters. So to return to Bourdieu's ideas about the logic of practice I would suggest that the logic of clubbing practice is radically different from the logic of everyday practice. It exists in opposition to this practice and in opposition to the sensual parameters through which the force of the everyday habitus is experienced. Bodies are remade and in the course of that remaking, the habitus which they are imbued with, becomes slippery. In terms of clubbing the logic of practice is a logic of socio-sensual alterity.

In relating the different theoretical perspective offered by Merleau-Ponty, Antonio Damasio and Pierre Bourdieu my perspective upon them was changed. The basic idea then is that we are connected to the world via our bodies, which are immersed within a constant set of sensual relationships in the world. This is Merleau-Ponty's point of being in the world and Damasio's proto-self. This immersion is itself structured or rather it becomes imbued with the "structuring structure" of habitus. However, from my observations of the club space and by interviewing my informants I began to suspect that this point of immersion posed other potentialities, that it was manipulable in itself, for itself, that is via the degree of intensity with which it occupied the flesh.

The connection between body and mind is not as structured as Bourdieu suggests, because it is open to the power of seduction. The sensual potential of the flesh is open to manipulation; it can be seduced beyond the sensual and emotional parameters of the habitus and in the process it can temporarily throw that habitus into relief, so that the habitus ceased to be taken for granted by being revealed through adopting an alternative practice. Yet because we are talking about a practice and a counter practice we should be wary of viewing these bodily constructions as resistant ideologies. The experience of clubbing that is grounded in a radical shift from every day practice could be felt as point of resistance for some clubbers; for others the same or very similar experiences were the reward they gave themselves for being part of the system of capital, the rock-star model of success, cocaine,

champagne and “birds in designer dresses”, the sensual practice of “living it large”, an expression that reveals the way clubs are experienced as the opposite of sensual and social mundanity.

This links us back to Damasio because it is the sensual intensity of clubbing that radically alters the proto-self and so impacts upon all other higher level stages of consciousness. We are always conscious of ourselves or rather the relationship that self has to the world. The basic experience that clubbers are seeking out, and often finding, is an intense socio-sensual connection to the club space and the people they share it with. Yet my informants were pragmatic about this connection; people may well experience a sense of “unity” to the whole crowd in a club, but it is the relationships they experience with the mates they came with, that provides much of the social force of clubbing. The club crowd does not consist of a room full of individuals, but rather a room full of pre-formed social groupings that become fluid over the course of the night. These groupings are the basic social unit of clubbing and because they exist in the outside world, as much as they exist within the club space, they provide a connective thread that can allow the experience of clubbing to filter out into the everyday world of punters, as a particular style of social relationship, that is grounded in the alterations in social practice experienced in the club space. Transferring this type of relationship to the rest of the world can be problematic but, as we shall see, it continues to resonate within these friendship groups, who have encountered and over time embodied a particular form of social practice. It is my contention that the proto-self can be profoundly altered through practice and that the way “objects” are encountered depends upon the physical and emotional posture through which we encounter them. The proto-self does not create a completely novel pulse in core consciousness for every object it encounters, because it is part of a historical process and so objects are encountered with part of the body remaining in a physical past, a prior state of effect that arises from previous encounters. As Bourdieu points out in relation to habitus:

“The *habitus*, a product of history, produces individual and collective practices-more history-in accordance with the schemes generated by history. It ensures the active presence of past experiences, which, deposited in each organism in the form of schemes of perception, thought and action, tend to guarantee the ‘correctness’ of practices and their constancy over time, more reliably than all formal rules and explicit norms.” (Bourdieu 1990:54)

Through linking Bourdieu and Damasio I began to gain a fuller understanding of both their work. The habitus must reside in the proto-self if it is to possess the properties suggested by Bourdieu. So the proto-self is both a biological and social construction, a

combination of our genetic and social heritage, that remains outside of consciousness and which grounds us into the world at a deeply sensual level. This point of sensual immersion is not as rigid as Bourdieu suggests, it can be altered. It is my contention that the sensually intense practice of clubbing deconstructs the habitus by generating alternate bodily forms and emotional states, that have no set frame of reference within our own society. The body is liberated from its habituated forms of practice and so is temporarily detached from the ideology towards which that practice is orientated. So we shall see how, within the club space, the bodies of women and men mutate as the sensual intensity of the club space becomes embodied over the course of the night. They begin to share a similar flesh derived from a sensually intense form of physical abandonment, that moves people beyond the structures of the everyday habitus. This in turn changes the way they relate to one another socially in the club space. Many of my female informants said they felt “safer” around men in clubs, than they felt around men in other social environments. They could be more sexually expressive or simply enjoy the sensuality of their own bodies to a greater degree, because of this change in social relations which was intimately linked to the alteration in people’s bodily and social practice.

This shift in practice added another theoretical dimension to my club analysis by steering me towards the work of Lakoff and Johnson, especially their notion of embodied metaphors and idealised cognitive models. These are cognitive schema derived from bodily experiences. It is my contention that clubbing, by creating new experiences, create new metaphors. The language of clubbing has produced a wealth of metaphors that people utilise to capture the club experience, which is fairly resistant to be encapsulated in language. So people get “out of it”, go “mental”, “live it large”, “get out like a trout”, “splattered”, “blissed up”, “tripped out”, they “feel the rush”, get “luvved up”, “blistered”, “shitfaced”, “chilled out” etc. all descriptions of particular bodily states experienced when clubbing, but which can then be utilised as terms to label experiences had away from the club space. So being “chilled out” is a bit like being “cool”, but without the standoffishness that can be associated with the term “cool”; it is a form of engagement with the world that is relaxed, yet powerful, confident but friendly, calm but energised. It is a state of being in the world that is derived from the practice of getting completely drugged up in an intense social environment, but learning to control that state in a laid back, friendly manner. So at times during their drug careers clubbers have realised there are points when they have to chill out and bring the “rush” back under control. It also related to the sense of physical relaxation you experience

when you get stoned, which alters your emotional perspective on the world by granting you a sense of amused detachment to the things you encounter in that world.

Many clubbing metaphors are more physical than linguistic. They relate to sensual states that are not articulable through language, but can only be shared as a point of sensual reference. For example the term “trippy”, which is derived from L.S.D, relates to a particular experience of the world. So on a visit to the hospital with my girlfriend we encountered an increasingly bizarre series of events that became more and more fraught as the day went on. The model we applied to this experience was “trippy”, but more than that we coped with it as we would have coped with a trip. Once you’ve dropped a tab of acid there is no going back, you have to see the experience through, but over time you learn ways to bring it under control, you adopt a particular attitude to the things a trip throws up and learn how to consistently make the best of them. We found the bizzareness funny, rather than threatening, the whole event was so odd and so unrelated to our everyday experience that trippy was the easiest frame of reference we could relate it back to and we allowed ourselves to perceive of it and experience it as if it was a trip, even though it was a serious predicament with potentially horrific possibilities.

However, some club metaphors never get labelled. They are held in bodily postures and attitudes that you adopt in relation to events. Your bodily posture when you greet people. The way you smile and when you smile. The way you express yourself physically. The way you touch people. How you relate to them emotionally, linguistically and proxemically. These bodily phenomena are all altered by passing through the club space and over time they become embodied as an alternative social practice.

The theoretical positions I have laid out above are combined to create a theory of sensuality that arose from my observations of clubbing. This is a theoretical perspective that explores the sensual and social properties of the proto-self, or Merleau-Ponty’s point of being in the world, and suggests that this point of immersion has certain properties that are revealed through the practice of clubbing. It provides the thread that will link my ethnographic data together and allow me to draw analogies to other fields of anthropological concern. Clubbing is an on-going process of world building grounded in radical shifts in social and sensual experiences. Over the course of a club night clubbers create a party state of body which underpins a party state of mind that is reflected in people’s social encounters. This practice is in itself a process, it is unfinished, at different times during their clubbing career what people want from clubs, the sort of clubs they want to attend, the type of experience they are looking for, changes. The space of the club itself alters but the style of social

interaction that clubs house, which is intimately related to their sensual intensity and their designation as informal party spaces, allows them to become tolerant and socially experimental spaces. The fetish scene provides a good example of this reflex, because it houses a sensuality that could not be made public without a social code to underpin its appearance and so provide people with a model of how to deal with it and negotiate the space. In clubs the socio-sensual aspect of people's worlds are thrown into relief; you see the world as a on-going process of sensual engagement, through which people create experiences which they value and enjoy, but which exist in their own ideological grey spot. British society has long held a suspicion of pleasure; a fear of the flesh and a distaste for hedonism. It has attempted to vilify these bodily extremes and imbue them with immorality. It has treated such pleasure as escapist and unreal phenomena to be controlled. Yet despite our society's best efforts the sensual nature of human beings has started to be celebrated and, as I suggest in my conclusion, Britain is becoming a sensual culture, as the habitus, that structured our relation to these sensual forms, is gradually deconstructed through alternative sensual practice, which makes people challenge the taken for granted assumptions about the moral and social nature of the flesh.

Language

The language and style of writing I have utilised in the construction of this ethnography is not as formal as many academic texts. I have made the decision to use this style of writing for a number of reasons. Firstly I was influenced by the thoughts of Paul Stoller in "*Sensuous Scholarship*":

"For most Songhay elders, the theoretical results of social science research are meaningless.... they *do* care about how well their tale is told. They care about the poetic quality of their story." (Stoller 1997:26)

I have attempted to tell the story of clubbing well because clubbers care about the way they are represented. So wherever possible I have avoided the language of academic abstraction in favour of a more visceral and emotive style of text, that attempts to capture some of the lived dynamism of the practices and experiences of clubbing.

However, I was working in a local field of inquiry amongst people who, unlike the Songhay elders referred to above, professed an interest in reading what I had produced about their worlds and lives and my theories about those worlds. They were interested in the study itself and I strongly believed that using traditional academic language I would alienate these

people from the text and obscure the often profound simplicity of the club experience, as they had encountered it. This I believe would be a failure in the ethnographic process as it is undertaken in relation to our own society.

So I have moved between languages, when necessary, utilising academic styles when they were absolutely necessary to communicate the sometimes complex ideas held in this work, but as an ethnographer my loyalties had to remain with the people, who had allowed me access to their worlds; it was their thoughts and words that came first when describing and explaining their experiences. As the study of people, I believe anthropology, in particular, has a duty to communicate beyond the walls of the academy and so, in the final instance, I have attempted to produce a text that could communicate its ideas to both clubbers and academics alike, by dealing with both the complexity and simplicity of the lived practice of clubbing. I have included a glossary of words and phrases that may be unfamiliar to academics in the appendices.

Video

The video which accompanies this work is an attempt to illustrate four of the elements of clubbing I discuss by showing them as part of the actual practice of the clubbing. I have tried to capture some of the look and feel of the club space by focusing on the aesthetics of the space, dancing, dressing up and the social 'vibe' clubs' house. A number of clubs gave me video access and I am extremely grateful to them for this favour.

Throughout this study I focus upon the practice of clubbing and the socio-sensual experiences that punters have while in the space, video allowed me to record some of these changes in situ. Yet even video has its limits it can not capture the heat, the feel of the crowds, the emotional charge of the night, it can only record the visible manifestation of these phenomena. However, it goes further than language or photographs ever can in granting the reader some access to the experience of clubbing. It shows some of the diversity of the club scene and links that diversity together as a visible socio-sensual practice. There were some technical problems with using video, clubs are dark, noisy and crowded and I didn't want to utilise large lights which would have changed the night, so I used night-vision technology, which the viewer will see as black and white on the video, this changes the look of the space but also allows the viewer to see the way people inhabit the darkness of clubs. I would advise the reader to view each of the four video segments after

reading the relevant text and I have indicated where such a viewing would be appropriate in that text.

Ethnographic Snapshot.

Clubland is a fluid social arena and so, unlike traditional anthropological studies, there is no stable community to examine. Instead, we have an arena of social collisions, movement and change wherein disparate groups set out to build their own style of party, which reflects their desires and their ideas about what makes a good night out. In this section I will give an account of participating in one such party paying particular attention to how it feels, at a phenomenological level, to be part of the socio-sensual experience of clubbing. This description was taken from notes written immediately after the night itself and a few scribbled thoughts written during the party. I have focused upon the way parties make you feel; the perspectives you form upon the action, as it unfolds before you; the actuality of rocking a night with a room full of strangers. I have altered the name of the club to protect its identity.

Hush

Standing in the guest line I got talking to a group of out-of-towners, who always came in for Hush, one of the women looked great in a pink fake-fur outfit, which she had spent all day making. I've always loved it when people create their own image on the cheap and still look amazing and it proved that Hush wasn't a fashion venue, just a make an effort event. We queued for about 20 minutes. It's always a bit nerve wracking waiting to find out if your plans have come to fruition and you are actually on the guest list. My turn, "I'm on D's list, anthropologist, study of pleasure, spoke on the phone blah, blah, blah." D not there yet and then... "OK you're in." Ha.

Next step, getting past security with my stash intact. The search looks thorough, pockets emptied, brisk frisk, not really worried about the acid, so small that it's virtually impossible to find, but the spliffs, a different matter. Again I get lucky and I'm waved through.

You enter the club down a dark corridor the music getting louder as you approach the end; walk into a brightly lit space, which is dominated by a large, pink musical box about seven foot high and ten foot long in which a live ballerina is performing; I immediately warm to the space. This is going to be fun. Grab a beer and catch my bearings. This space is a bar area, overlooking it is a balcony which is presently empty. Two corridors lead off from the left hand side, but they're both closed off and everyone is forced to pile into this one area.

On either side of the music box lies two small podiums upon which the Hush dancers are already in full flow. Hush hires people to dance and look fabulous for the night in order to get the club moving and impose a glamorous aesthetic upon the space. It is important to get the right look, because the Hush team understood the importance of watching and being watched in the club space and their aesthetic encouraged big looks, which gives the event a larger than life appeal. The podiums are full of drag queens, delectable boys and lingerie clad women and they are “givin’ it some.” This immediately brings a grin to my face; they look great, sexy, fun and their efforts pay off because the gagging for it crowd, who have been waiting and waiting to get in, start to go off almost immediately.

The intensity is already building and I decide it’s time to get an edge, so I find myself an out of the way spot, which isn’t easy in such a brightly lit room, and surreptitiously drop a tab of acid. It should come up in about forty minutes to an hour. So I do a little boogying, smoke a few fags, enjoy watching the crowds swirl by and check out the mighty fine looking women, dressed to kill and slaying me with every immaculately manicured set of lips. Grrrr down boy.

The space is staged managed beautifully using the logic of critical mass, when the bar is packed, and people are shaking a booty, the main dancefloor is opened up. Later on when folk need a breather the balcony will flourish. However, people are having so much fun that there isn’t a huge rush to get into the main floor, which prevents a lull in the proceedings. The main floor is a much bigger space and dark; the speaker stacks double as podiums and there is a raised platform on the far side; in the middle is yet another podium, this one larger than the others, though not higher, (drug fucked people have a tendency to fall off things) the music is LOUD, banging house, relentless beats, that physically invades your flesh. Sweet. The acid is coming up nicely weaving its way through my system. Colours are crystallising taking on that gorgeous psychotropic intensity; the room looks alive with potential. Potential for what I’m not sure. The tallest drag queen I’ve ever seen passes by with her entourage. I notice what looks like a group of bodyguards, for who I’m not sure, they are MASSIVE men and I have to get through them to get to the loo. The biggest seems to be four times my width and twice as tall, I feel like a midget, can’t work out whether he is truly that huge or if my sense of perception is changing. I smile and say, “Excuse me” he smiles back and ushers me through the group.

From the toilet cubicles the occasional sharp intake of breath is the only indication of the night’s chemical content, the more trippy I get, the more trolleyed everyone else looks. I try to convince myself that I appear sober. Who am I trying to kid. I make another trip to the

bar and to my astonishment it's stopped serving alcohol. It's 2am, there's another seven hours to go before the club shuts and it's going to be water all the way. Never mind. I decide to head off to the main floor for a spliff in the shadows.

Boom-Boom-Boom, merrily sucking on a marijuana stick, the room's filling up and the speaker podiums are all bagged. On one is a woman in gold sequinned bra and mini-skirt, tres sexy, she's already giving it some vent, the lights are reflected upon her tinselled muscular body, she looks fabulous changing from red to orange to green, smile plastered over her face, magnificent and strong. The dervishes start to inhabit my feet this time fuelled by the growing, buzzing, energy unleashed by the LSD. My body's loosening up, it feels sinuous, sensuous and strong, you can savour the energy pumping through it, lithe like snakes, erectile and passionate, alive, my whole being feels like a cock hovering at the point of ejaculation. The gap between the music and I has gone; I am possessed by a friendly daemon, but there is no sense of losing myself, if anything I'm me to the power of three, Uber-Phil.

Time has lost all meaning, I have no concept of where I am in the chronology of this event, just music, dancing, and people, that's all that matters. I stop for a breather and move out to the other bar to cool down. The balcony has finally been opened, people are grooving up there and watching the party. Some guy is beating out Tito Puente style riffs on the bongos, the crowd has caught the fever, a group of women in multi-coloured wigs pass me by sucking on lollipops. I have never wanted to be on a stick so badly. Divine madness reigns, but it is so good humoured, so impeccably social, that it seems not only normal, but oh so right. I slurp down water, mouth parched from dancing, drenched in sweat, but I've moved beyond giving a toss about how I look. The party's got me by the tail.

Work my way over to the corner of the music box, the ballerinas have gone to be replaced by the Hush dancers, who tower over the floor, living monuments to the joys of self expression and home made creativity. Start talking to the guy standing next to me, he's 19, lives in a small town in Wales, come down to visit some mates who live in London, his smile is swallowing his head and his pupils are the size a couple of coal scuttles.

"I've never seen anything like this, it's fucking wild, I want to live in here."

Home from home. Decide to go for a wander, the place is coming to the boil, wonderful sights dance at the periphery of my vision. Then I'm confronted by a luscious crowd of love librarians, perfectly sculptured glamour, all wearing the same type of glasses. They look like pornographic secretaries, like the ones found in under-the-counter movies. Delicious. They

ice past in a Tippi Hendren style. A guy who's dressed in a fetching pink baby-grow wanders past grinning and talking animatedly to a lingerie clad black woman.

Back into the dark for more bass, sonic stimulation in a technological age, dancing hard, fast and frantic. Such a succulent frenzy, my body feels so good, loose and passionate, feasting upon the glances that dart across my flesh and spur me on to more exertion. A woman in a pink, leather, bra and skin-tight, pink, leather, trousers walks directly up to me smiles and starts grinding out a lascivious mambo. A pole dancer without a pole, we dance for a couple of tunes and then with a grin she's gone into the crowd. A heavily muscled gay guy stands, top off, flesh bulging, his teeth clenched so tightly together that I half expect them to shatter into dust. His feet are completely still, eyes tranced out, his only movement is the flexing and unflexing of his steroid pumped torso. I need another breather. So I sit and watch, just getting off on the voyeurism of it all. Then a sparkly eyed pixie suddenly makes a beeline for me from across the room. She looks naughty and smily at the same time. She looks me straight in the eye and speaks in a voice with a melodic Irish lilt.

"There's always one more dance left in yer, always." Then she's off, but oh she spoke the truth and I hurl myself back into the action.

So it continues, the infectious chaotic thrill of crowds bound by chemicals and rhythms and the urge to party, everywhere you glance people are smiling, laughing, havin' a time, a governmental nightmare, the order of the anti-system, extreme, well mannered, out of it, or should I say in to it. I get talking to a great looking couple; she's tall, elegant and smilie, he's shorter and built like a bouncer, they're both in their late 30s. He's dressed in a dinner jacket, but without a shirt and round his neck he wears a fetching pink dog collar. We chat, enjoying the sights, talking about nothing, just blarney, but that's all that is required.

I'm in the well lit bar, people are dancing everywhere, including upon the bar itself, hips gyrate, bodies are flushed with carnal energy, music pounds out engulfing the crowd. I'm captivated by the sight of sweat pouring from the semi-naked flesh of the women, all I want to do is lick them, clubs are so sexy.

Everywhere I look people are smiling, big smiles. How often do you get to see that? Faces shimmering with excitement, passion, sheer joy writ large upon the crowd. It's emotionally ripe for the plucking and the human race doesn't seem that fucked up after all. It's all hanging together through a combined act of willpower grounded in the simple intention to have a good time, that grants people a willingness to accept others as they are and the expectation that they will do the same. You would have to work really hard to find something to have angst about.

“Do a little dance, make a little love, get down tonight, get down to night.”

(Song by Fierce Ruling Diva)

My ears prick up and it's time to shake my booty again. The room's going fractal, charged with the energy of people in motion, the act of living being done. I wander back into the darkness to find the central podium packed. I want to play too. So I wriggle my way in. The temperature immediately rockets and I curl around the beat skanking along with the mass. Glorious. Strangers' faces beam right next to you. Arms and legs and torsos weaving and writhing round each other, all held together by that virus known as bass. An inevitable act of aural seduction, guttural sound, viscous, sticky and inexplicably wise. My body feels liquid, it has gone through so many changes, the tensions of the week melting away, the rushes of energy, the intimate fleshy cartography of dance, moving how I only ever get to move in a club, expressive, fervent motion, a kinaesthetic freedom that resides in muscles and sinews and bones.

I head off to the loo again, a guy staggers out playing with his nose, eyes twitching, the slight green hue of his skin suggesting that he had imbibed a little too much crystal stimulation. He joins a group hanging around outside and mutters that he might have to leave. I think he was looking for a little sympathy instead he's greeted with a chorus of “lightweight, lightweight” from his friends, who proceed to drag him off to the dancefloor again.

It's happened four times now, every time I try to take a break the same Irish woman pounces out of nowhere to spur me on and every time it works; it's the only communication we've had all night. What a laugh. I don't know the woman, but I've got a soft spot for her, a tiny, trippy pixie making sure I stay with the program. I've been dancing for the best part of five hours and I am increasingly in the mood for an ice cold lager.

Then kaboom the lights go on. Ooooh, harsh, most people scamper to the main floor, which is still dark, but the clearing out process has begun. This can be a strange time in a club, a sudden jolt to the system as you realise it's over. I decide to grab my coat before the final rush gets going, people are standing round chatting, a few couples are fumbling and necking; it's very mellow though, which is great. It's 8.45am when I leave, the sun's up and I can grab a tube home, which will save on the expenses. The tube is weird, sober looking folk going about their business, while my brain merrily buzzes away. It always feels deliciously mischievous when you come out of a club with the sun up. You feel part of a vast conspiracy of pleasure, which somehow these other folk haven't caught onto just yet.

Creating the Club Space

We're in the V.I.P. All the drinks are on me? This is my party? I thought everything was free.” (Jungle Brothers: V.I.P)

Clubs come in all shapes and sizes ranging from luxurious pleasure palaces, with multiple dancefloors, bars and chill out rooms, to basements, holding a couple of hundred people, which are dark and unfeasibly loud. The club space must be a seductive space, because clubbing is a process that must be remade each time a venue throws open its doors. In this chapter I want to examine the way this space is constructed and the roles played by some key club personnel in creating a club night. I want to particularly focus on the sensual nature of the space, its aesthetic and emotional qualities, that underpin the forms of sociality that arise within its walls, which makes clubs feel radically different from other public spaces. I will therefore concentrate on my informants' perspectives upon their own roles in creating the space, before focusing in more detail upon its aesthetic dimensions and the way those aesthetic phenomena feed into the social experience of clubbing.

Promoters

Promoters are the people who organise clubs; it is they who get the nights together and make sure punters know about it. There are a number of types of promoter, some are attached to specific venues, others create particular nights which they then place in venues, some just organise particular styles of club or niche market events, some do it for money, some for love, some for both. I spoke to a number of promoters during the course of this study and asked them to explain what they were trying to create when they set up a club. Their accounts varied but the point they all agreed on was that clubs had to offer an experience that took people beyond the socio-sensual limits of the everyday world. I will begin by examining two different promoters' accounts of the style of space they set out to create.

“The most important thing you're trying to create is the atmosphere and that takes everything: the people, the music, the building, how people dress; it takes a bit of everything; they're the ingredients you mix up. Hopefully you end up with a product that is very attractive and people want to be part

of it. The Blue Note for example is made up of a really amazing programming policy, good interior, cool area; it makes it all attractive. They say they're queuing up for the Blue Note, but that's just the name they put on it. Getting the vibe right is the most important thing."

Q: "How do you get the vibe right?"

"It's making it buzz. Making people excited about it; they know about it; they want to get there. The vibe is creating an addictive place to be. Such an addictive place to be that people think, 'I've got to be there. I can't miss it this week because A) I want to see that girl I really fancied, B) The music's brilliant, C) I'm going to have the best fuckin' time.' They've got to be there that's the vibe. Even if it's an ambient club, where you want to relax; it's a different buzz but you still feel like you need to be there." (Club Promoter: Male 26; 9 years experience.)

The above quote pulls our attention to the holistic nature of the club space, the way in which each element of the club experience, the people, the clothes, the decor and the tunes, all play a role in constructing an "addictive space". The term addiction must, in this sense, be viewed as a metaphor for excitement; it is a seductive social force unrelated to any drug connotations associated with the term. First and foremost people are looking for a good time, what they class as a good time and who they want to share it with differs from club to club, but the quote above shows how the club must mark itself out as housing a particularly intense experience of the world. It must distance itself from people's everyday experiences by creating a space, that people will identify with, that reflects their ideas and aspirations about who they are or who they'd like to be.

Sarah Thornton explores these symbolic and identificational aspects of clubbing and reveals how notions of distinction and difference are created across the whole swathe of club land (Thornton 1996), but it is the experience of clubbing, itself, which turns those ideas into actual social experiences through embodying them in the crowd. Identifying with the club space is important, but over the course of this study I examined a number of disparate forms of club and had an excellent time in the vast majority of them. The fact that they housed different identities was subsumed by the process of participating in the night and the social buzz that night held. This experiential content could bridge any identificational divide, so although I have eclectic musical tastes, and enjoy both Dub tunes and Hip-Hop beats, I can't say that I personally identify on any deep level with the Dub scene or the Old School Hip-Hop scene as an important biographical and communal reference point, yet I thoroughly enjoyed the clubs themselves simply by throwing myself into the thick of it and participating in the night. Each club had its own experiential parameters and its own style of experience,

but they were held together by a consistent socio-sensual thread that allowed each style of club to achieve its intended goals.

The following promoter stresses the importance of this participatory practice and the role the club itself plays in creating it:

“I try to spin everyone up to a critical mass so that they reach the state of mind where they allow themselves to behave how they want. You have to encourage a crowd; to knead it out of them, because in the end they make the night.”

Q: “Why does your club work so well and have such a loyal following?”

“XXX feels like a squat party; people can do what they want and the night has a chaotic feel; it’s almost a riot; if someone kicks a hole in the wall no one gives a fuck. The night can be unnerving; it’s exciting; when a crowd surges it’s scary and I think that feel attracts more interesting people, well in my point of view anyway. I’m not interested in commercial clubbing, the sort of places that attract the tourists or people pick up out of the listings.”
(Male)

The idea that people must be “encouraged” to club is important; usually people don’t walk straight into a club and immediately throw off all their reservations. The club mentioned above felt chaotic and riotous, but that chaos was good humoured and it was the sheer weight of bodies that could make it feel “scary” when it surged. The job of the promoter then is to create spaces that will encourage people to move beyond their own behavioural constraints, while generating a social form that suffuses this act of liberation with a social structure that holds the entire night together.

The Emotional Alchemy of the DJ

“I nominated my DJ for president.” (Steady G : DJ for Prez)

“I love spinning tunes, when it’s going well you know that what you play is what the crowd is feeling emotionally, in their guts, but it’s a relationship with the crowd. Sometimes you want to take them somewhere but they’re not ready to go there, so you have to follow them and give them what they want; then sometimes you can pull them in another direction and they’ll stay with you and let you take them on a journey. I love it, seeing them get off on the tunes and dancing and having the best time; you’re there to make their night and when it works it’s special.” (Female 35; 15 years experience.)

DJs are venerated in club land for two distinct reasons. Firstly their celebrity status plays an important role in granting clubs the notion of “hipness” and the “sub-cultural” capital

examined by Thornton. Secondly, as hinted at in the above quotation, they are the emotional alchemists of clubbing who ensure the crowd gets the experience they desire by utilising the intense emotional and kinaesthetic properties of music to generate the bodily states which you witness in a club. In a club music exists as much in the body of the crowd as a thing listened to and it is the job of the DJ to ensure that this physical and emotional relationship passes between tunes, so maintaining this level of social cohesion and raw physical energy, which marks the club space out in terms of its sensual intensity.

There is a difference in experiencing live music and recorded tunes in a club, although some clubs cater for both live and recorded tunes. One DJ explained this difference in these terms:

“The whole point of night-clubs is that at no point are you told what to do. It’s the opposite of gig participation. The DJs are there; you can’t even see them a lot of the time, but they’re there to entertain in a way that is very different from a band. A rock gig involves you stepping into the world of the band and losing yourself by being part of the band, whilst in a club, as part of a dance crowd, well it’s about you being part of everyone else, being part of a crowd. It’s not isolating in the way that a gig is isolating.” (Male 32; 14 years experience.)

The DJ is there to serve the crowd and bring them together without becoming the focus of attention themselves. I have however seen clubs where the entire crowd faces the DJ and dances at the DJ, rather like people watching a rock gig, yet the fact that the crowd are dancing changes the relationship between punters and DJ. The DJ is there to make them dance, to drag the dance out of them, to energise and elate the room, so even when the punters are facing them they are still into the dancing more than the act of watching. A good DJ has to know how to read a crowd and sense what they want, which is a skill they gain gradually through practice, they have to be able to sense the mood of that crowd, their energy levels and the particular experience they are seeking. To again quote the above informant:

Q: “How do you work out what tune to drop next?”

“You’re looking at people trying to work the crowd out but the process is almost something that you can’t describe, there are times where you just know that people want more Cheese Beats or alternatively you see them settling into the groove, so that you know you can up the tempo and harden the set up. I’m not sure how I know that, occasionally I get it horribly wrong as well. A lot of it is experimentation and experience; you learn to spot when the crowd is getting itchy and if it’s all going wrong then you cut a track out and whack something really stupid on.” (Male 32; 14 years experience.)

Some DJs are associated with particular styles of music be it Hip-Hop, House, Drum n Bass, Garage or whatever. Others play more eclectic sets blending disparate styles and genres, that can go all over the place, while still keeping the crowd happy. One such DJ described his selection to me as “A party set”, when I pressed him on what he meant he replied:

“For me it’s not about playing the latest tune or whatever is in fashion at the moment; the music’s got a job to do and that’s to kick the party off and keep it going. A party is often different from a club though, in a club people are often there to listen to and so be associated with a particular style of music, that’s all they want and they just get on the floor and dance or stand around the edges and headnod along, but it can all get a bit serious. It’s like they’re performing their relationship to the music so people can see how into it they are. With party tunes you’re trying to pull the crowd together to get them grinning at each other and having a laugh; you want the people to be more important than the music; the music’s there to create that sociality not to be the focus of the night itself.” (Male 31; 8 years experience.)

I shall explore the relationship between parties and clubs in greater detail in the chapter on the Vibe. This DJ is simply pointing out that there is more to clubs than just listening to music, that the music “has a job to do” and that this job is aimed at creating a particular style of sociality. This is at odds with Thornton’s focus on music as a badge that marks out “sub-cultural capital”; it even suggest that this “sub-cultural capital”, which focuses on music as a type of knowledge, can inhibit the appearance of the party sociality if punters take their relationship to the music too seriously. DJs’ styles evolve and change over time. One DJ explained that:

“At the end of the day I don’t just play Asian vibes, I play all over the place and I’ve tried to push that with people, because if anything I have a bit of a Balearic sound. Yes there are Asian vibes in there but there is definitely more to my sound than that....Then again sounds develop and mine might well change. It’s like Drum n Bass, you know a lot of people, like me 8 or 9 years ago, dissed the Drum n Bass scene. Now there’s a lot of people who can’t get enough of it. I’m embarrassed to admit it but I was definitely one of those people who was very snobby about Jungle music, very, and then suddenly one day I woke up and thought fuck this Drum n Bass is great, the Trance I’m dropping is actually bollocks, I’m bored of that.” (Male.)

Styles shift and mutate as fashions change or DJs come across new influences and a good DJ is always looking out for new musical vibes, that they can utilise in their sets. The most important aspect of the job is the ability to create and sustain a particular emotional vibe, that brings the crowds together through a sense of shared euphoria and a passion for the tunes. DJs seduce the crowd via the body, they instil rhythm into those bodies, they exhilarate

them, pushing those bodies harder and faster, slowing down to give them a break, dropping a sudden classic tune which has everyone dashing on to the dancefloor. This is DJing as emotional alchemy which uses music as its base matter, sometimes it's intense, even serious, like the beats unleashed in Hardcore Techno, at other times it's playful shifting from pounding dance, to nostalgia tunes, to classic Gospel and taking the crowd along with them for the ride. Whatever the style of DJ they must succeed in making the crowd "buzz" and binding that crowd together into one sweaty, writhing, social mass.

Security

The role of the security team plays two important functions. The first is the policing of the night. The second is to protect the legal image of the venue so insuring that it will keep its licence. The difference between good and bad security is based in the attitude of the security teams and more, and more those teams are mixed as women enter the field of club security. One very good security guy, who'd been working security for 8 years, summed it up like this:

"We're here to make sure everyone has a good time, which means you've got to be friendly and approachable. You need a lot of patience; you need to enjoy watching people having a good time; you need to be able to have a joke with the customers. Most of all you've got to make them feel safe, there's not many that come looking for trouble; it's our job to make sure the ones that do either never get in or are weeded out before they mess the night up." (Male)

The most obvious security presence in any club is at the door where, particularly in big venues, the punters are searched. These range from a quick pat down for weapons to fairly intense body searches. I've seen punters forced to remove their shoes and socks, and security will make you empty out your pockets; they'll go through your cigarette packets, wallets and bags. Many clubbers accept this, some seem to find it quite exciting; all part of the club adventure. However, a number of the older clubbers, I talked to, had begun to resent these searches.

Certainly your reception at the door of a club can make a big difference to the attitude inside. The friendliest spaces I went to all employed a greeter at the door to act as a buffer between the security and the punters. As one such greeter explained:

"We want to set a good atmosphere and I think it's important that the first person you meet, when you get into a club, isn't the security because some of them aren't as friendly as they could be. So I stand here and welcome

punters into the space, so that they know that it's a friendly club and we want them to enjoy themselves. It seems to work, we've had no trouble so far and I think that's because we set the tone from the start." (Male)

However, there is a different social dynamic operating in smaller clubs and in many ways the crowd police themselves, as one promoter explained:

"The vibe in a good club is viral and a good promoter can use that to take people beyond what they thought the night was going to be about. That's why we do smaller nights; they need less security; they are self policing and amazingly polite, but then all decent clubs are polite. You see someone who's a bit distressed, they're drug fucked and yes it's their own fault, they've been greedy and taken more than they can handle. You see people looking after them; they sit them down, get water for them, people help each other out. Some of the mega large club, where there are too many people, they have got to have security; they've got to have St John's Ambulance going round, because people get lost in them and they can't be self policing." (Male 32:14 years experience.)

I've been to other venues where activities like dancing on the bar and punters having sex in public were all part of the night and the security teams knew this and were quite happy to let people get on with it. So although you can't do everything you may wish to in every club, you can usually find club spaces that will cater for your particular desires, as long as everything is kept consensual and friendly. It's how you do something that matters more, in these spaces, rather than what you actually do. The security teams play a huge role in protecting this sense of freedom. In practice they are the final arbiters of behaviour on the night, if they clamp down too hard then they will destroy the atmosphere of the club, because people are there to experience a greater degree of freedom than is possible in the majority of other public spaces. If someone is having sex in a club, where that's OK, then the security team are there to ensure that people don't get hassled for seizing this freedom, that they are allowed to enjoy and savour it.

There have been attempts made to structure and licence security teams in order to distance them from the old night-club bouncer image. A licensed security guard can have their licence removed if they fail to tackle drugs in clubs and this obviously has a detrimental effect on their employment prospects. So it's important to remember that most security personnel aren't in the club to make people's lives a misery; it's simply their job and they do it as best they can, while placed within a system where financial considerations, licensing and those all important profit margins ensure that security must impose the laws of the outside world within the club. One promoter presented the venue's owner's side of the case:

“You can never ever stop people taking drugs unless you get into an Orwellian situation and I really don’t think people would tolerate that, there’d be riots. Some clubs do full body searches because it’s a business and the law says no drugs. Clubs wouldn’t do a full search unless they were forced to. The majority don’t do a full search, but when they want to or need to uphold their licence they have to do these business things; they have to keep the authorities happy or else they’ll be closed down.” (Male)

So the security teams are caught in a tough position: they have to protect the venue and ensure the punters can have the time they want. Unlike the early days of rave though, when ecstasy use was open and easily visible, drug use in the contemporary scene has become far more covert. People often consume their drugs before entering the space, when they do take them in a venue the majority are discrete and difficult to spot. On a crowded dance floor it’s impossible to see someone drop an E and because drinking has returned to clubbing much of clubbers’ behaviour could easily be dismissed as drunkenness. So although security teams do their best there is no real way in which drugs can be completely removed from the space and punters don’t want this to happen anyway.

The Punters: Entering Clubland

The vast majority of clubbers club with friends; they do not attend clubs alone and aren’t particularly interested in clubbing on their own. There are obviously some exceptions to this general rule but, in this chapter, I will focus mainly upon groups of friends who club together, because they make up the vast majority of the club crowd. Many of these friendship networks are formed away from the club space, via work contacts, student friendships, the old school gang and these make up the group who you arrive in the space with. However, once there, the boundaries of these groups often become more diffuse so that, although you arrive with a crowd, you won’t always stay with them all night. People talk to strangers, whoop it up on the dancefloor, go for a wander to check out the rest of the space and this level of diffusion can alter the structure of these core gangs over time. They can expand as groups begin to collide and merge; they can splinter as people find lovers or other friends, yet all the informants I spoke to valued what the club experience gave to these friendship networks and the role it played within their social world.

So how do people actually start clubbing? Each informant’s story was slightly different so it’s worth recounting some of them:

“The first club I went to was The Camden Palace when I was 13. I was smuggled in underneath a drag queen’s crinoline dress. I basically

befriended him and he invited me out for the night; they were concerned I wasn't going to get in, even though they hadn't realised just how young I was because I was doing that 1980s big hair and make up thing, and as they were in crinoline drag I nipped under the crinny and floated past Scarlet on the door. I had a fantastic night and I knew from that moment on that clubs were going to be important to me." (Male)

Another informant gave me a thumb nail sketch of her forays into clubland:

"I started clubbing in 1985 and my clubbing's changed over time. Early on you just have to get out to have something to do, but once you're there you begin to find out what's really going on and you begin to streamline it more to what you and your friends enjoy the most. As you went into different spaces you'd meet different groups. I'd say socially what happens is clubbing and then post-club parties, which are the best place to make connections, which are useful in all areas of your life apart from just the socialising and entertainment aspect of it. The longer lasting relationships have tended to happen in those post-club parties, while the shorter lived, quick-fire, hello in the street ones happened in clubs. I'm organising my own party, at the moment, and I'm trying to root out the people I used to club with and I'm wanting to see them and you do see them about in the street, or out and about, and you have a chat and they tell you about what they're doing, or recommend somewhere to go, or say why don't you come along to this. It's a party network really." (Female 29; 12 years experience.)

A third said:

"I'd always gone out but it was mostly about drinking and having a bit of a dance, very disco. I started enjoying proper clubs when I had this really good friend called 'Sh' and we used to get quite excited about similar things and discovered that we could dance well together and stuff. We used to go out with her boss, who was a restaurateur and he'd invite us out; we ended up going round with his gang of friends who were 30,40,50. Mostly we were a bit like the female entertainment but it was on good friendly terms. They generously fed us cocaine and that's when I started enjoying the complete drugs thing really. I was about 20, but I'd done stuff like acid at 14, but not in relation to dancing in clubs, so cocaine was my first dance drug really and it made a big difference to my experience of the club space. I began dancing with people in a club, rather than just being there to show off dancing; it was to do with feeling more involved with the actual people there, rather than just the space or the event." (Female 30; 11 years experience.)

These descriptions of entering clubs for the first time and then moving through the scene are drawn from both the pre and post rave era of clubbing. The first informant started young, got a taste for the space and hasn't stopped since. He now throws his own nights and his enthusiasm seems undimmed. The second informant began clubbing as something to do and then gradually moved further into the scene, meeting new people, shifting her locale, exploring the options available to her. The third makes it clear that she viewed her pre-drug

clubbing and her post drug clubbing as very different experiences, the latter being the better in her case. If anything joins these three disparate experiences together it would seem to be a search for adventure, the desire to experience something new, whether this novelty was provided by the people or the drugs or both, they offered an experience that moved beyond the mundane and introduced these clubbers to alternate social worlds, that were exciting enough to make them want to be included in them.

These social adventures are based in sharing clubs with other people and enjoying the presence of those people. The club experience changes over time with different crowds and styles of party; it evolves beyond the initial encounter and develops its own social and experiential pathways. Some of these social groups remain within the club space, others develop into longer lasting and deeper friendships. However long they last, though, they become part of a person's social biography, part of their emotional encounter with their own social world and in the vast majority of instances these encounters are positive. You meet a stranger, you gab for a while, talking bullshit, smiling, just enjoying them really, then they've gone, you may never see them again, but neither do you forget the simple fact that there are good people out there.

Core Crowds

“If you're going to make a top night you have to have the ability to involve people who are interesting and who make up the core crowd of a night. These are the people others want to be around, the ones with style, though that's nothing to do with FASHION; they are characters; they know how to party and they help set everyone else off.” (Male)

As the promoter above suggests the core crowd in a club help define that club's identity and keep the party going. These are the people who will be guest listed, because they give something to the night. Core crowds are formed in a number of ways. In the first instance they are the promoters' and DJs' friends; people who have partied together for some time and enjoy partying together. Secondly people become core crowd members by simply becoming regulars and partying hard, so that they get noticed and invited to other nights; they make an effort to add to the party by participating in it to a high degree; they will dress up, dance hard, socialise and play a role in “kneading” the party out of the more reserved clubbers. Thirdly, and particularly in larger venues, core crowds are created by paying characters to come dressed up and to dance; they become part of the clubs visual and social

fabric. Some clubs will guest list model agencies and celebrities in order to ensure a good looking crowd, that other people may want to be associated with.

However, the core crowd's most important job is to pull the party together. As one informant explained:

“When we do our nights I suppose there's about twenty people that make up the core crowd, but over the course of the night we don't spend a lot of time with each other, because we're circulating and chatting and dancing and trying to get other people to let their hair down and join in, that's the most important job of the core crowd. They can't become cliquey or stand-offish, because if they do people feel left out and the party never gels, so they have to be friendly and if the core crowd's friendly then the rest of the crowd usually follow.” (Female 30; 14 years experience.)

However, as another informant explained:

“I think there're two types of core crowd. There's the celebrity crowd that people just want to get close to and feel part of, because it connects them to that whole celebrity thing. Then there's the clubber core crowds, who aren't celebs or anything, they just know how to party and they're interesting, you know leftfield; they have a good time and people see them having a good time and they set the tone of the night, so people know how far they can go. It's like the getting dressed up thing, your core crowd gets dressed up and then people see that they can get dressed up and then the next time they come they risk wearing something a bit more adventurous, because they know it's OK; they won't be standing out too much on their own. It gives people permission to push it further.” (Male)

Many of my informants were core crowd members, of the clubbing rather than the celebrity variety, they had partied for years and also created their own nights and their own social scenes. They had got to know each other through clubbing together and they respected each others' party talents. One informant said:

“Well there's certain people we always try and get in; like X and Y, you invite them and it's like inviting 20 people; they add an extra level of energy to the night.” (Female 28; 10 years experience.)

The core crowd are the people who produce a party more than they consume it, but more than that the best core crowds are attempting to draw that act of production out of everybody else, to bring them into the space, so that they too can seize the night.

The Aesthetics of Clubbing

(See “Aesthetics” section on video.)

Clubs obviously vary in terms of size and budget and the overall look of the space, but there are some aesthetic features that are evident in most clubs and play an important role in constructing the atmosphere and feel of the club space, by marking them out as different from other forms of public space. In this short section I will examine a number of these aesthetic and sensual attributes and describe the impact they have on participants.

Darkness

The vast majority of people's club experiences occur at night. The main exceptions being festivals and recovery gigs on a Sunday afternoon. Night-time has a sensual quality all of its own that can alter your whole experience of the world. It can make it more intense, more immediate and occasionally scarier, because darkness holds an unknown quality about it that is a combination of both promise and threat. It is a time of invisibility or transformation where, shielded from the clarity of Foucault's gaze, people can become slippery in terms of the activities they seek out and the personas they present to the world. A. Alvarez described the city's night in these terms:

"Night in the city is time out - time for leisure and intimacy, family and lovers, hobbies and pastimes, reading and music and television. It is also the time for excitement and celebration: theatres, movies, concerts and party-going, wining, dining, dancing and gambling. For people who hold down boring or unsatisfactory jobs, night is the time when they feel they lead their real lives." (Alvarez 1996:259)

A point of view that was mirrored by my informants, one of whom said:

"Night is the final frontier because it's the only space and time, in the current system, that can be given over to things that won't necessarily make money. During the day you have to do things that will allow you to survive financially. Whereas the night you don't." (Male 28; 11 years experience.)

Darkness is one of the qualities of the club space itself, though the amount of dark space in a club tends to be proportional to the dressed up nature of the space. Big glamorous crowds don't want to disappear into the blackness, they want to flounce it up and be seen, but for the majority of clubs darkness plays an important role in bringing people together; it accentuates that conspiratorial edge and facilitates the sense of anonymity which is often important in a club especially at the beginning of the night. Dark space has its own properties, which Eugene Minkowski described in the following terms:

“Clarity is not the only fundamental substance of life; we also live in the night. Isn’t it necessary, perchance, to turn our eyes towards it? But I no longer have the black night, complete obscurity *before me*; instead, it covers me completely, it penetrates my whole being, it *touches* me in a much more intimate way than the clarity of visual space.” (Minkowski quoted in Cataldi 1993:48)

The idea that darkness “covers”, “penetrates” and “touches” alerts us to its sensual properties, the way it breaks down the experience of distance and this is important for a club crowd. It binds them together through immersion into this sea of dark space. That, in itself, has the capacity to feel exciting and to liberate participants’ bodies. As one informant put it:

“It’s hard to dance when a club’s too light, you feel too vulnerable; it’s like dancing during the daytime I find that a bit odd too, though once I’ve got going I don’t mind as much, but there’s something about really dark rooms that makes it easier to dance and go a bit wilder; it feels more natural.” (Female 29; 7 years experience.)

Dancing in the dark is easier than dancing in broad daylight where the movements of the dancer are revealed to the world and open to scrutiny. You often see people closing their eyes, when they dance, enveloping themselves in their own darkness and allowing themselves to experience their own body in motion more intensely by cutting out the distraction of the crowd. This is a temporary state for most club dancers; a way of getting into the dance experience through creating a sense of invisibility and freeing yourself from the gaze. Some of the dancefloors I’ve been on were so dark it was virtually impossible to make out anyone more than a few feet away, which I personally wasn’t so keen on because I love to watch people dance. Then again these spaces tended to be hardcore dance venues, where the vast majority of the crowd were on the dancefloor for most of the night, so watching played second fiddle to participating. This level of darkness plays a role in deconstructing difference in a club. Out on the dancefloor, shrouded in this cimmerian world, the tyranny of vision is abandoned in favour of the delights of invisibility and the physical closeness of bodies getting serpentine on the beat. What you can’t see you can’t judge and can’t be judged by.

While videoing material for the PhD I used a camera that was capable of night-vision. Upon watching these images back I was struck by the way moving from darkness to the false daylight of the night-vision system changed the way in which I perceived the movements of the clubbers’ bodies. In the relative clarity of the night-vision picture movements became more incongruous; the light accentuated the alterations that clubs bring about in clubbers’ physicality; they were far removed from the way people moved during the day-light hours.

The club gave this physicality a context, it made sense of the sheer physical abandonment and super charged corporeal excess of those bodies. Shrouded by the darkness bodies became liquid, emotions rose to the surface, faces were hyper-expressive revealing joy, confusion, contemplation and sheer unadulterated bliss.

Club Visuals

The visual content of the club space has grown over time and become an industry, in itself, with companies like “*Eyecon*” and “*The Light Surgeons*” appearing to cater for this visual demand. It may seem strange to talk about darkness one minute and then light the next, but the fact is that the darkness of clubbing makes it the perfect environment to create strong and intense visual imagery through the use of lasers, lights, film, video and slides, which all leap from the darkness with a particular ferocity. Some clubs utilise fairly awesome lighting rigs, which they combine with other visual media, to create a kinaesthetically charged visual experience that definitely adds to the otherworldly feel of a club.

Visuals play a number of roles in the club space. At *Swaraj Eyecon*’s film loops and slides played an important role in giving the space its particular identity. Mixing up old Bollywood footage with circuit diagrams and kung-fu flicks they accentuated the night’s Asian origins. They added a huge amount to the space making it aesthetically intense and charged with vivid colours and wonderful combinations of imagery that altered the feel and experience of that space. Walls became cinemas and expanded beyond their physical boundaries and you’d see people completely seduced by the flickering screens, just grinning, almost hypnotised by the flowing patterns and colours. One promoter described his sound systems nights in these terms:

“We do particular nights called Synaesthesia, in the case of our nights synaesthesia means the visual and the audio working together in synthesis, and what we do, which when it’s in top-gear feels like the edge of chaos, is take six video projectors in one big room and let people turn up as video jockeys and D.Js doing their stuff in time to the music. It adds to the intensity; it fucks with your head and it really does give you that synaesthetic feeling where all your senses are blending into one another.”
(Male)

The senses are bombarded to a point approaching overload in such spaces. You can begin to feel psychedelically charged just from the aesthetic rush of the environment; its visual

fluidity adding an extra element to the power of the tunes. This is aesthetics as a seductive force and I began to

to see similarities between the club space and the art “happenings” of the late 1960s and 1970s, the main difference being that clubs do it better. The idea behind “happenings” was that the viewer became part of the art and so art became a social experience, that broke down the barriers between the viewer and the work. The main problem with the work was that it was too self-consciously arty and usually rather dull. Then clubs appear and seem to attract a lot of creative minds that want to work outside of the institutional confines of the art world. They produce art to add to a pre-existing social experience, to make it different from everyday public spaces. In the process they create amazing visual environments that play around with the drugged up minds of many clubbers and utilise that altered consciousness to shift the visual dynamic. Club visuals looks great when you’re sober, but when you’re under the influence of drugs the visuals themselves can warp and morph before your eyes beyond their original forms. Art becomes alive; it has its own potentials that shift and change with each viewer; the actuality of the visual stimulus becomes less important than the way it inhabits individual minds; there is no right way or wrong way to view it; there is only the relationships that weaves this seductive aesthetic into the fabric of the club space. Costuming and dressing up can also fulfil this visual potential, because it marks out the space as different; it moves it away from mundanity and expands the seductive quality of the space.

Conclusion

There are a number of other elements of the club experience that have a sensual and aesthetic dimension and I will look more closely at the music, the dancing, as well as the look and feel of the crowd, in later chapters. At this juncture it is important to stress the way in which the club space utilises a seductive aesthetic to facilitate the appearance of the actual bodily practice of clubbing. This practice has to be “kneaded out of them” and this simple fact reveals that the practice of clubbing is very different from other forms of social practice. It is a radical practice; one that you become more familiar with over time as you begin to realise the social and bodily freedoms that the club space offers to participants if they are willing to participate. I have made a brief reference to Foucault’s notion of the gaze, in this chapter, and I will explore this idea at various points during this study, because the ability to cast off the “gaze” and to even experience its reversal is an important aspect of clubbing.

This chapter raises another important distinction: the opposition between the inside world of clubs and the outside world of the everyday. For me this is a sensual distinction, rather than a set of ideas or an ideology of clubbing in opposition to the everyday world. It is a point of sensual tension, that plays an important role in defining the club experience through its difference from other social and public spaces at a sensual level, i.e. in terms of how they feel to participants. Again I will explore and develop this idea throughout this work, but I want to stress that this tension does not create clubbing. Clubs are populated by people who are looking for a good time with their friends, and clubs draw punters from a variety of social backgrounds, sexual orientations, economic positions and ethnic communities. Some of these crowds may have difficult lives outside of the club space, others don't, but regardless of where they have come from the experience of clubbing itself adds something they value to their lives. I believe this sense of value arises from this point of sensual tension; it is an emotional and experiential value, rather than an ideological position; clubbing is about creating worlds that feel right. The experience they offer can carry a number of possible meanings and interpretations for punters, which will arise from the sensually intense nature of the club experience in relation to other socio-sensual aspects of their lives.

Dancing

(See “Dance” section on video.)

“It is hip how people dance nowadays; it’s called doing your own thing.”

Introduction

In terms of this study dance is important because it offers the most visible example of people altering the sensual parameters of their world. Club dancing is a particular species of dance; it is not a set form of dance, one that must be learnt and mastered as a technique. Instead the limits of dancing are the limits set by the social rules of the space. You can do anything on a dancefloor as long as it doesn’t stop other people enjoying their own dancing. Even then I have seen dancefloors part and shift to grant someone, who was “going for it”, the space they need to dance, before gradually closing back in again when the crowd decides they’ve had enough and want to reclaim the space for themselves. This is a good example of the self policing mentioned in the previous chapter.

Club dancing is constructed within specific sensual parameter ranging from “blissing out”, where participants “lose” themselves in the beats, the space, the crowd and becomes a body in sublime motion, to a more social experience, where participants dance with those around them and enjoy the feeling of socio-sensual connection that sharing dance with others can evoke. These two poles are not exclusive, people pass through various modalities of dance, they “bliss out”, dance with others, rest up and simply watch, yet the sheer sensuality of dance suffuses each activity with a seductive charge which binds the crowd together. The body of the dancer is the physical manifestation of a club’s energy; it empowers the space by its presence; it is a sexual, sensual and exuberant body and these aspects of the bodily practice of dancing alters the experience of self and other in the club space. The sensual intensity of club dancing arises from the social experience of the space and then feeds back into that sociality, by sustaining the passionate and erotic charge, that marks the club space out in sensual terms from other public spaces. In this chapter I will examine these aspects of the dance experience and the importance that my informants attached to the practice of dancing.

Dancing: before and after raves.

For many clubbers, including myself, dancing is one of the foundational elements of the club experience; nothing makes more sense of the intensity of the club environment than wriggling into the middle of a sweaty, writhing dancefloor in order to shake a booty. Clubbing's greatest achievement has been the re-popularisation of dance as a mass form of social experience, particularly amongst white men, the majority of whom had spent the preceding years standing round in clubs, clutching pints, watching women groove around their handbags, while fearing that dancing would emasculate them and leave them open to ridicule by their peers. In 1984, when I first started clubbing, before the ecstasy-rave movement had begun, I would be one of the few men going for it on the dancefloor in clubs, usually receiving scowls from the other men around me. It did not leave me enamoured of the club environment as it seemed like little more than a noisy, angst ridden, overcrowded pub.

When I went back into clubs in 1989 the floor was heaving with tight-jawed men on ecstasy waving their hands in the air and grinning so hard you thought their faces were going to rip. Many of these men were the same ones who had resolutely refused to dance only a few years earlier. The difference was extraordinary; the sheer physical energy produced in the club environment immediately went ballistic and the levels of angst and machismo, that was so noticeable in the past, diminished. Both these alterations were seen largely in terms of the effects of ecstasy, by clubbers themselves, but this study would suggest that they were as much to do with the simple act of dancing than any property inherent in the drug. The drug reduced people's self consciousness and fear of censure to the point where they could enjoy dancing. Men moved from being drunken wallflowers to being very much part of the club environment as they started to discover dancing for themselves.

Some men had of course always danced but the breakdown of partner based dancing, during which the man had traditionally led the woman through the moves, left men without a role to play on the dancefloor. The dance styles that men partook in, during the two decades before rave appeared, tended to stress aggression: like the Pogoing and Slam dancing of Punk, or were competitive: like Northern Soul, Disco and Breakdancing. They placed heavy emphasis on the machismo of dance, either through stressing its drunken, violent physicality or by creating styles that had to be practiced and mastered before they could be displayed. This left men split into dancers and non-dancers and the visibility of the floor space kept the majority of them on the periphery of the club space too self conscious to step forward and risk making a fool of themselves.

The arrival of ecstasy and the rave scene altered the face of dance by rejecting the adoption of any particular dance style and by placing it in an environment that viewed macho posturing as a complete waste of time and energy. It was as if the music itself underpinned a physicality which men felt comfortable with. The humping bass and accelerated beats of the drum machine were exhilarating enough to drive drugged out men onto the floor and, once there, it generated a muscular, vigorous and sweat drenched style of dance, that replaced outward aggression with a form of internal frenzy. It felt masculine and men could get on the floor and do their own thing without fear of censure from either men or women. The inclusion of men on the dancefloor also had a positive effect on women's dancing, suddenly they were no longer dancing under the watchful eyes of sexually tense men, who were only in the club to get pissed and pull. Instead everyone was in it together and the general air of delirium granted both genders an increased sense of freedom on the dancefloor, as the sheer sexual and sensual aspects of dance re-surfaced via this on-going liberation of the body from the judgmental gaze of the gendered other.

In the rave environment both sexes granted each other permission to enjoy the sheer physical seductiveness of their own and others' bodies in a safe environment. All my women informants stressed this level of safety as being an hugely important part of their clubbing experience. For them finding a space in which to sense their own bodies, as both sensual experiences and erotic objects, without having to worry about some "idiot boy" getting the wrong idea and hassling them, was one of the main draws of the club space. As one informant suggested:

"I get to be sexy; it seems silly but I really enjoy it, when I'm in a club dancing my whole body feels hot and horny and alive. I can dress up in a way that I could never do on the street or in pubs, because I think in clubs people will accept that you're doing it for yourself; they can watch you and enjoy you, but that's as far as it goes; it's playful rather than serious; it feels safe, much safer than other places where it might cause hassle; I feel more in charge of the situation, less threatened by people watching me. You know that some guy might be getting turned on by the way you dance, but in a club that feels less dangerous because you expect the men to not behave like arseholes. If they're just smiling at you and watching you and enjoying you or dancing along with you then they understand that it doesn't necessarily mean you want to fuck them; it's just part of the night, part of the fun of clubbing." (Female 41; 19 years experience.)

The other side of the coin came from an informant who said:

"I love to watch women dance in clubs, all glammed up and looking beautiful; it's a big part of clubbing for me, enjoying women enjoying themselves; they're so fucking horny." (Male 26; 8 years experience.)

However, a number of female informants also suggested that, although better than other environments, some men in clubs still had a lot to learn. As my next informant explained:

“Straight clubs have got so much better, they’re less like cattle markets, but if I really want to live it up I go to gay clubs, especially when there are trannies there, because they’re already huge people and gay guys will just applaud you no matter how big, outrageous or sexual you are as a woman. If I want to just wear a g-string and stilettos and wriggle my bum and tits then I can. They let you get on with it and they enjoy it, but they’re never all over you because they’re not interested in shagging you, so you’re just allowed to enjoy behaving in ways that you can’t in other places, even some straight clubs, because the men can’t handle it or maybe it’s just that you worry more about the men not being able to handle it, so it feels more threatening.” (Female 36; 16 years experience.)

It’s not only men that can occasionally try to hassle women for the way they dance. Another informant told me of an occasion where:

“I was dancing on my own and this group of women were on the floor with me; it was pretty empty, but they kept crowding in on me like there was no room and giving me horrible nasty looks and whispering to each other, then staring at me. It wasn’t very nice; they seemed to resent me dancing on my own, like they were threatened by it or something. It hasn’t happened very often at all, but when it does you just think, ‘Oh you sad bastards just leave me alone and enjoy yourself, that’s what we’re all here for.’ ” (Female 42; 5 years experience.)

Such incidences are rare, as all my informants pointed out, but they illustrate how the sensuality that is displayed in clubs is still in the process of being socialised and that this process is on-going rather than complete. However, the sheer seductiveness of club dancing, its Dionysian and sensual potential, has forced men and women to change the way that they perceive of the sensual body.

The Dynamics of Dance

Only the most confident or intoxicated clubbers walk straight into a club and directly onto the dancefloor. The majority of punters must first accustom themselves to the space itself and start to relax into it. Clubbing can be a nerve wracking leisure pursuit, particularly when you’re attending a new club space for the first time. The main emotional charge that you experience, when you initially head out to a club, is a mixture of excitement and anxiety. Excitement because you’re looking forward to a good time in an intense social space.

Anxiety because you don't know what's going to happen, how the evening will go, who'll be there or what will transpire over the course of the night. The pre-club booze up can help alleviate some of these worries, but they don't usually get rid of them all together. This social anxiety means that dancefloors must build with the social buzz of the club and they pass through various stages over the course of a night, which reflect this buzz. The model laid out below is drawn from observing hundreds of dancefloors, I must stress that this is a general account of the process and that the whole thing can change if a particularly up-for-it group suddenly arrive and throw themselves into the thick of the dancing, which will accelerate the whole process. In general though this five stage plan held true in the majority of club spaces, regardless of the specific identity of the club itself.

Stage 1 is the pre-dance stage, where punters begin to embody the practice of clubbing. They congregate at the peripheries of the space, around bars, at the edge of the dancefloor. Standing with their mates, scanning the crowd to see who's there, they drink, giggle, watch. Some are waiting for their drugs to "come on" and at this stage the crowd is still anxious about the night. Will it be a success? Will they have a laugh? Do they like the look of the crowd? Are they going to feel comfortable in that crowd? Yet because clubbing is a sensual practice these doubt are answered sensually, bodies start to alter and shift their postures as the intoxicants take effect, the crowd builds as does the noise and the heat. People begin smiling and laughing, the music starts to infect their bodies and movement. They are beginning to occupy the space sensually, to feel emotionally at ease, physically energised but relaxed. They start to enjoy the crowd and feel less threatened by it. The "vibe" builds gradually in a club at the beginning of the night, too few people and the crowd can remain self conscious, too many and it becomes almost static. That vibe is revealed through the subtle geometry of the body, the way faces start smiling, the shifting of people's proxemic boundaries, the seductive allure of flesh and eyes. Club crowds must be hospitable and welcoming and this is again communicated physically: it is a bodily attitude that is relaxed, passionate and, most importantly, friendly. Once this first stage of physically occupying the space is underway, then people begin to head for the dancefloor.

Stage 2 is the point where a dancefloor tentatively begins. Dancefloors can take time to form and in their initial empty stages they are the most visible space in the club. Very occasionally they erupt out of nowhere, because the DJ drops a club favourite or a confident party posse arrives in force. More often than not, though, they begin to build incrementally going through a stop-start process, as people surreptitiously start to dance at the periphery,

move into the visible space and then retire back to the edge. Usually the floor is surrounded by would be dancers; the infectious nature of the music gradually permeates people's bodies, their heads nod, feet tap, hips wriggle, bodies bounce. No-one's dancing out in the open yet, but they are beginning to move into the dance by experiencing the music as an embodied force. This is a period where people feel particularly self conscious, by beginning to dance they must move from the safety and anonymity of the crowd, to the visibility of the floor. People at the edges often start dancing, while chatting with friends or facing away from the floor itself, as they attempt to conceal themselves and their movements by pretending that they're not actually dancing, more just moving about while talking.

Some dancers, especially the more confident ones, will use this stage to have a boogie and enjoy the sense of space that will disappear once the dancefloor gets started. However, lone dancers can be intimidating to the crowd, who will have to enter into a spatial relationship with them if they move onto the dancefloor and so risk comparison. If a lone dancer does succeed in starting a dancefloor it will usually occur after they leave, when others will pile in behind them for a boogie. Watching others getting on down and enjoying it can certainly have a catalytic effect on the crowd and reduce their sense of self consciousness, but it is far easier to walk onto a dancefloor when there is a group dancing, rather than a lone person. People would rather be in a group at this stage and, rather than utilising the whole space available, they will stay close together concentrating on one another and attempting to remain as invisible as possible. A logic of critical mass applies on a dancefloor once it reaches a certain level of participation, usually 2 or 3 separate groups of people dancing, then it will suddenly explode into life and the balance between the dancers and the watchers is rapidly equalised. The dancefloor becomes more anonymous the busier it gets, which makes it easier for others to start dancing later on in the evening.

Stage 3 is a warm up period; freed from the direct controlling effects of the "gaze" of the other, dancers start to physically work themselves into the dance. The temperature rises, muscles warm up, bodies start to relax as the music becomes embodied deep within the flesh. This sensation of feeling yourself moving is almost like a sixth sense, the kinaesthetic sense, the sense of self and others in motion. You experience your body in a radically different way, each movement unleashes shimmers of energy that flickers through the body of the dancer. You become hyper-aware of your own self within the crowd. Each person linked by rhythm and movement, the pounding of the bass bins and the rapid fire riffs of the drums, enclosing the group, pulling you into the succulence of the sound, leading you deeper into the beat immaculate. Each dancer is different, unique, adopting different tempos in the

music, some dancing with their arms, others from their feet or their hips, some standing almost completely still, except for the shiver they exhibit each time the bass hits. The joy of dancing in a club is that there is no wrong way to dance, as long as you're getting off on it, lapping it up, lovin' it, then you can dance. The only bad dancer is a miserable one.

The perfect dancefloor is one that coalesces and begins to dance together, a floor that drips smiles and sensuality, where bodies and eyes can meet and combine even if it's just for a few seconds before moving on. Where people dance with strangers, friends and lovers alike, fuelled by the rushes of energy that pass through bodies and illuminate faces drenched in succulent pleasure. This energy is emotionally charged, it is passionate, and people look beautiful when they are dancing and relishing it once their anxieties have fled and the oppression of the strangers' gaze has become a thing abandoned to the motion of the body; they look incredible, because you seem to catch sight of the life pumping ecstatically through their veins, empowering them, changing them, allowing them to pack every ounce of themselves into this space, this time, this electrostatic moment of carnal living.

Stage 4 is the point where the dancefloor reaches a critical mass of bodies; it is the hottest and most intense stage in terms of being amongst others. Full dancefloors can become static, they reduce the range of potential movement, this is the hands in the air stage when you have to focus your movement vertically, rather than horizontally, to avoid collisions. As one informant explained:

"Dancing on a really packed floor, that's really going for it, can feel like leaping into a bucket full of eels; it's great, hot, bodies everywhere, all just squirming and getting sweaty; it's great." (Male)

Dancing can become more akin to wriggling on a crowded dancefloor, as bodies pile in on top of one another utilising every inch of room; this has its own charm: the sheer closeness of the bodies next to yours, the unavoidable contact of eyes and skin, the sensation of moving en masse. Your kinaesthetic sense is externalised by being transferred from your own body into the body of the crowd. Although you are physically moving less it can seem as if you are moving more, because the whole club arena is in motion. You feel part of a playful conspiracy of sweat and pleasure, of bodies united under the cloak of darkness, revelling in each other's presence, sucking in every ounce of living that you possibly can. The room ceases to be occupied by strangers instead it is filled with party people all satisfying their need to BE passionate and sensual people. The heat can be overwhelming as the energy level rises with each tune the DJ drops. The sweat which pours from your skin seems to cleanse you, draining out the toxic residue of frustrated plans, niggling worries, stupid

arguments and petty insecurities. Nothing matters but the beat, the crowd, the dance. Glorious. Some clubbers themselves see this experience in terms of escapism, but to the outside eye it seems so social and physically creative, that it forces you to re-think the meaning of the term escapism itself.

The crowd has worked together to create this moment. They have put time, energy and hard cash into the night, but most importantly they have generated a sense of social camaraderie, within the club, that underpins their ability to cut loose and feel good amongst the people who surround them. The dance is one way in which that sensation manifests itself, in both individuals and groups, by allowing them to possess a different physicality in the world, one that is strong and fervent, relaxed yet powerful, one that has shed, even if only for a night, the physicality of the drudge.

Stage 5 the crowds have thinned out but the dancefloor still rocks as the end of the night looms, instilling an extra urgency to the proceedings. The “lightweights” are leaving; the party “hardcore” remains. This is the point where the dance die-hards are most evident. Pushing themselves through exhaustion, refuelling on drugs or simply dragging up reserves of energy, and feeding upon the kinetic charge unleashed by the music and crowds; they continue to cut a serious rug. For these people the dancing won’t end until the lights flick on. Some will have danced all night, barring the occasional fag break and trip to the bar or loo. I have seen people hit the floor for 5 or 6 hours at a time. In many ways these people are the energetic heart of a club, because without a dancefloor to provide a central point of reference the energy in the space swiftly dissipates. Hence the importance placed upon DJs in clubs; they must tease this energy out and sustain its presence, because if the dancefloor dies the club will soon follow. There is usually a look of shock upon these dancers’ faces when the lights come on. They have been occupying time via their bodies and emotions and this warps the chronology of the event. It seems like a continual present in which time passes in rushes, or minutes expand out into hours. This temporal disorientation is an important part of the experience, because it is grounded in a sense of immersion into the club space and the crowds. I overheard one group at the end of the night summing it up like this:

“It can’t be six o’clock; it feels like two o’clock, fuck we’ve been dancing for ages, has the bar shut? Shit, where are we going next? Will Trade be open?”

Off they went, still visibly boogying, looking for another dancefloor to finish off their night on.

The Experience of Dance

In this section I'll present my own experience of dancing and then compare that to experiences described by other clubbers. Dancing in a club, especially under the influence of Class A drugs, is a special species of dance. As one informant explained:

"I was trained as a dancer; I worked as a dancer; I have always danced; I've always enjoyed dancing, but I never really felt like a dancer until I started taking drugs and dancing in clubs. That taught me more about dancing than any other experience of dancing ever has." (Female 41; 19 years experience)

The presence of the crowd also alters the way you experience dancing. If you're dancing alone you have to create and sustain the energy of the dance yourself. In a group you feed upon the energy of those around you, which constantly refreshes the dance, empowering it, intensifying it, socialising it. Human social energy is encountered as an actual physical force, which exists in the space between dancers, and is communicated through the subtle geometry of the flesh. Eyes meeting, smiles, gwaneyng hips, shimmering bodies, the heat of human social contact all wrapped inside the beat; which is its central reference point and from which poly-rhythmic riffs emerge to lead the dancer down improvisatory pathways. Slowing down, accelerating, changing heart rates and patterns of breathing, as the beat teases movement from the crowd and their perception of their own and others' physicality changes. The space between yourself and others is compromised as people's bodily boundaries are altered. When dancing with someone you can experience a merging of bodies as you press yourselves together, grinding into one another. The sensual charge of heated touch resonates through the skin and finds itself reflected back through the face of your partner, eyes become seductive, limbs fluid and libidinous. This though is often more flirtatious and playful than serious, a game of touch or almost touch where bodies, though apart, move together as if combined. The touch of eyes and heat and erotic potential. The empathetic sharing of an emotional form that exists in the relationship between those who dance. Speech becomes an irrelevant irritation; it is bodies which speak and express, urging you on, feeding you energy, now locked together in a single rhythm, then exploding into separateness before linking once more. The easiest way to describe it is that it feels like vertical fucking, but this fuck has a sense of humour, it is playful and intense simultaneously. It can last a minute, or ten, or all night long. This sexual analogy was shared by my informants, because it captured the emotional and physical intensity of dancing in the club space. One informant described dance in these terms:

“Well the best way to describe dancing is it’s the next best thing to sex; the feeling of your whole body being completely connected together and fluid and moving and you can just feel energy flowing right through your body.”
(Female)

When I asked one informant about her enjoyment of dancing she was fairly frank in her reply.

“I haven’t had sex for almost two years and dancing allows me to enter a wonderful sensual place; it’s almost as good as sex in terms of making your body feel fabulous” (Female 42; 5 years experience.)

This intensity builds over time though. When you first start dancing your body feels tight, but through the act of dancing it gradually begins to unwind. The temperature rises and the warmth that floods through you immediately begins to loosen joints, muscles and sinews. Like a sauna or a trip to the tropics. You’re HOT and it feels so, so, fine. The aches and pains of the week begin to evaporate through movement. Limbs stretch and writhe, unlocking knots of tension and releasing more energy. The music begins to permeate your skin and starts to reside in your muscles and gut, like a seductive and exhilarating fever your temperature continues to rise, sweat drips from your torso, a gob-smacking grin enlivens your face. You are not alone in this feeling though, it infects the crowd, leaping across the floor with incredible rapidity. Breaking out in small pockets, luring more and more people into its virulent grasp until gradually it will reach a point of maximum infection and the frenzy of the dance fever takes hold. The dancefloor is “on one” and I don’t mean drugs, I mean living, not in the cramped and confined spaces of everyday life; grey flees the building to be replaced by vivid reds, burning oranges, iridescent blues and a slither of topaz. You ain’t in Kansas no more. You’re on a dancefloor and it is fearsome fine.

You can literally feel these changes deep in the flesh, your posture becomes liquid, you can sense the energy pumping through your veins, as this sensorial realm begins to dominate consciousness. Your kinaesthetic sense is firing on all fronts, all that matters is the dance. The sensual residue of the week, your weaknesses, anxieties and strengths are channelled into the dance and so transmuted into movement, energy and heat. They are not simply forgotten, their form is altered, their shadows are expunged from the flesh. Those knots of tension, that are the physical manifestation of problems at work, the heaviness of depression, the stooped form of anxiety, are all cast off and replaced with a body in lithe, supple motion.

At times this can feel transcendent; it is a physicality that takes you so far beyond the everyday experience of your own social body, that it felt as a sublime manifestation of self in world. As one informant said:

“If you haven’t fucked god on a dancefloor then you’ve never truly danced.”

Male.

This statement hints at the intensity of experience that dance can unleash. Having seen flickering ethnographic film of the possessionary rites of Candomble or Vodun, and read about the “*boiling energy*” of the Kung-San’s healing rituals the sheer physical and sensual force of these ritual acts doesn’t surprise me, or appear radically different from a type of physical experience that I’ve had in clubs. I have taken myself elsewhere on a dancefloor. I have inhabited a carnal and exhilarated body that has felt transcendent. Except there was no god on my dancefloor, there was no cosmology of possession, no expectation of spiritual ascension, just people, booze, drugs, grins, music, all packed in on top of one another combining to produce an experience which becomes more than the sum total of its parts. “*It’s fucking large mate.*” just about sums it up.

However, by focusing on those moments of intensity, as Malbon does in his discussion of the “oceanic experience” (Malbon 1999), you can miss out so much of the dance experience. In fact for older clubbers the “oceanic” is little more than a sensual trick, that is seen as being less important than the sociality of the dancefloor. It’s the faces in the crowd that becomes more important. Sharing the dance with friends and strangers, enjoying their physicality, as much as you enjoy your own experience, relishing the sexual charge of their bodies, their smiles, the sheer pleasure that possesses their flesh. As one informant put it:

“One of my favourite things about dancing is that point when you catch someone’s eye on the floor and you’re both obviously getting off on the music, so you start to dance together and you dance for the track, but when it ends you’ve just got to hug them or thank them, because it felt so good to share that thing with them and no I’m not talking about being pilled up; it’s just giving that moment you’ve shared some recognition and thanking them for it before you dance off; it’s about openly enjoying other people.” (Male)

These points of social interaction are a massively important part of clubbing and the dancefloor is one of the best spaces for them to occur, but even simply watching other people dance has its own rush. As one of my informants said:

“I do love watching dancers going off on one on the floor, when you’re just sitting down having a break and watching someone completely go for it and you see them have a really good time, that’s fab to watch. It’s much better than anything you can watch on T.V.” (Female 41; 19 years experience.)

The seductive passion of dance can be enjoyed, even when you’re not in the thick of it yourself, there is something about the physicality of dance which is immediately appealing, even to someone whose just watching. Dancing’s ability to drain the tension from the body

of the dancer, to revitalise their occupation of time and space and show them off at their best as people is remarkable in itself.

The way people dance changes over time and these changes help keep the sensation of dancing fresh. As one informant explained:

“Every time I dance I think ‘Why aren’t I doing this all the time, more or less?’ It’s basically you notice all parts of yourself at the same time; I still enjoy finding myself dancing in a way that I’ve never danced before; I don’t have one way of dancing. When I was younger and I was dancing to Madness, or whatever, my dancing would be quite specific and now it’s a lot more playful, a lot more myself in a way. Playfulness on the dancefloor is basically really important. I’ve always enjoyed dancing, but when I was younger I would be a little bit more aware of what I was portraying of myself as I was dancing. I was more self conscious, but then I went out with people to some Jungle night, that I was really into at the time, and people just started stepping and crouching and just jumping around being reasonably idiotic and it relieved the whole macho atmosphere, that you can get in Jungle clubs. If I see someone dancing and I’m thinking ‘I’ve never felt like that, because I’ve never moved like that’, I try to copy them without making it embarrassing for them. It’s a real pleasure, even if it’s a move I don’t completely like; it’s a real pleasure attempting to feel the music in the way that they appear to be feeling it.” (Female 30; 11 years experience.)

This informant stresses the way she changed her dancing by copying other people and so experiencing new ways of dancing as she clubbed. This sensual mimesis plays an important role in allowing people to explore the properties of their own sensual flesh. They change the way they move and occupy the club at a physical level. Dancing itself can become habituated in practice and so lose some of its intensity, because it ceases to be experienced as a radically different physicality. To counter this and keep their dancing fresh clubbers must expand upon their repertoire of dance techniques. This can occur through mimesis in the club itself, but it can also be created away from the club space. Certainly for me learning Tai-Chi for a year had a direct effect on the way I danced and my recent attempts to learn how to belly dance have had a profound impact on my style of dance. In turn the knowledge gained by dancing affects other sensual aspects of clubbers’ lives. As one informant pointed out:

“I wouldn’t have sex with a man who couldn’t dance. You watch a guy who can dance and who is an imaginative dancer, a sexy dancer, and you can see that he knows how to move; he knows about rhythm; he understands his own body and from my experience men that can dance are a lot better in bed than men who can’t; they seemed to have learnt about sex by dancing.” (Female 29; 13 years experience.)

I have included this quotation because it reveals how the experience of dancing becomes a form of sensual knowledge in itself; it teaches you about your own body, how you can make that body feel and how you can intensify those feelings. It opens up the realm of sensual experience as something to be explored, a type of wisdom, that is a property of your own flesh. Through dancing you learn about movement and rhythm and how to connect with another person's body and that, as the quote above reveals, this knowledge is transferable to other sensual activities.

Having fun on the dancefloor is one of the most crucial part of dancing, sometimes you just enjoy yourself by dancing alone and creating a strong, passionate connection to the music, at others you're playing with the crowd, dancing with friends and strangers alike just getting off on the sense of being a body in socially exuberant motion. As one informant explained:

"I have a huge respect for people who do Tango and really sexy partner dancing, but club dancing's different; it's an expression of exuberance and once you've got the basics down, if you can follow the beat, you express your exuberance about the beat in any way that you feel fit. You don't dance with one other person, you dance with everyone else on the floor. You rotate a bit and dance with someone else or dance with several other people. It's a big mass of people dancing and enjoying each others' dancing." (Male 32; 14 years experience)

This ability to express yourself physically without fear of censure was demonstrated by a number of incidents that I observed on the dancefloor. On one occasion I watched a lone male simply stand on the spot and leap up and down grinning as hard as he could at everyone around him. He looked like he had popped a few Es and for a moment his physicality became that of an excited child. His sense of exhilaration was instantly communicated to the strangers, who surrounded him; he ceased to be separate from the group; he became a physical emblem of the club's growing euphoria and so added to that euphoria via his presence. On another occasion I witnessed a young, heavily set guy suddenly burst into a reasonable and extremely energetic interpretation of Irish Dancing. He looked like he weighed around 18 stone, but in an instant his body began to defy gravity and his feet flew, sweat poured off him, his eyes were clenched tight shut and his face radiated sheer joy. It looked both majestic and deliciously silly. These incidents give some indication of the level of physical freedom tolerated in the club space; you don't have to look good, when you dance, it is enough to simply dance and express your passion for dancing and this freedom is one of the most important qualities of the club space.

Display

Strutting' the goods in front of a crowd is an important, but less openly expressed part of the club experience. The hesitancy, which surrounds talking about display behaviour in clubs, is derived from participants' sense of embarrassment and an unwillingness to admit that they enjoy the attention that their dancing, or even dressing up can bring, in case they are seen as poseurs. This may be a particular example of British reserve in action, however that same reserve is mostly abandoned over the course of a club night itself. Therefore I'll start with my own experience of being on display in a club and then compare that with other people's thoughts on the subject.

I like to get dressed up when I club and as an exuberant dancer I get looked at a lot when I party. Some of those looks are complimentary, which is enjoyable, others aren't, which is just one of those things that, interestingly enough, became less and less important to me over the course of my fieldwork, until I reached the point where I no longer cared what strangers thought of me. Before this fieldwork I would pay lip service to the idea that I didn't give a toss what people thought of me, but this wasn't always what I felt in my guts. Then I clubbed night in, night out, and as I got used to the environment and the people any residue of that gut feeling evaporated and I got to the point where I really and truthfully didn't give a monkeys, which is an amazingly liberating sensation. One informant described her own very similar experience in these terms:

"People give power to the rest of the world by constantly worrying about what that world thinks of them, but it's bullshit. Yeah if I've done something horrible to someone and a friend tells me off I'll listen to them, because I don't want to hurt people, but in terms of how I choose to live my life, what I wear, the things I enjoy doing, my lifestyle, if you like, well that's my business and I won't give people the chance to put me down for these things and so gain control over me by caring about what they think. After all, what you wear or how you dance isn't important is it? It's just a bit of fun and just because other people take it more seriously than me I'm supposed to conform to their bullshit standards; it's not happening, but it's taken a long time to get to that point" (Female 41; 19 years experience.)

For me one of the catalysts for this transformation grew from dancing. I love to dance. I can't stress enough how good dancing makes me feel. I am also a confident dancer, so when I got into clubs the allure of the dancefloor always got the best of me at some point in the night. I also enjoy space when I dance, because of the physical freedom it allows and this meant that I would have to step out onto a empty dancefloor and become visible. This stepping out was an interesting experience, usually I'd be relatively sober, having drunk two beers, and for the first couple of tracks I'd "phase out", closing my eyes or staring at the

ground, but once my body started to loosen up then I could look at people, catch their eyes and smile and feed off their energy, because I had space my dancing could get pretty wild. These experiences were interesting, because they revealed to me how much of the sense of freedom clubbers' experience comes from the nature of the crowd's "gaze" and that I didn't have to be "out of it" to club. The freedom was already there; it was written into the social rules of the space; the intoxicants simply made it easier to embody this sense of freedom, to experience it as an emotional actuality. They allow you to first tune into the sociality of clubbing and then intensify it as a form of social practice, as the night progresses. Once you've put yourself on display, in a club, it becomes progressively easier to repeat the experience over time, as you become more confident in the space. There is another aspect to this display behaviour the attention was fun, but that's not the only reason I behaved as I did. One informant described his own display behaviour thus:

"I don't do the display thing for me, well I don't feel like I do it for me; I do it for the fun of it and I try and get people to interact with me. If I'm strutting round the dancefloor, like a cockerel, it's because I want other people to come out of themselves. It's not showing off; it's trying to provoke and tempt people to go further. It's not about performance; I don't want people to look at me; I want them to interact with me; to be with me; not stare at me. The display thing is all very silly really; it's a game" (Male 32; 14 years experience.)

This game is about giving something to the club space; it's about utilising it to its full potential. The space itself can grant you the freedom to become bigger, more expressive, more outrageous and the more people participate and reveal this freedom, through their participation, the easier it becomes for others to follow suit.

Sensual Cartography

If you really want to understand the power of club dancing it is not enough to simply view it in its own terms, instead you have to place it within a field of sensual experience that expands way beyond the club space. Dance is one way of physically occupying your own world and as such it is intimately related to the way in which you experience the world outside the club on a sensual, emotional and social level. I would argue that the whole experience of clubbing is marked out by the intensification of this sensual and emotional realm, via the sociality of the club space. Through dancing people radically alter the way they experience their own body and they share this alteration in physicality with other people. They feel sexier, empowered, more "real", more expressive than in other aspects of

their lives, but this is sensual, rather than an ideological shift. In terms of Damasio's model of consciousness I would argue that these feelings arise from a radical shift in a person's proto-self, that map of the body which underpins consciousness itself. So we get informants describing dance as:

"Dancing is like non-conscious expression; it's expressing yourself without having to think about what you're doing" (Male 31)

The socio-sensual intensity of the club space becomes embodied by the dancer and through dancing they express their own experience of this intensity. Which is why dancing in a crowded room is very different from dancing alone, because you're immersed within and energised by the sociality of the space. It becomes part of your body and, so following Damasio, part of your mind. That body-mind is already altered and intensified by intoxication. This shift in the proto-self exists as an internal feeling, that becomes an external social attitude, that is expressed in the world. As one informant explained:

"There are times when I'm coming up, or dancing, when the ecstasy rushes me and I have to close my eyes to block out what's going on around me, or else it can get too much, but once I've closed my eyes I can cope with it, because I'm just concentrating on how my body feels. Then there're times when I'm dancing with people and enjoying that and that's usually when the drug rush has calmed down a bit and I've got it back under control and I can concentrate on them instead." (Female 32; 9 years experience.)

At times, when you become "ecstatic" or "oceanic", you are experiencing the full sensual intensity of the intoxicants within a safe social space; you can allow yourself to get "into" that experience, to abandon yourself to it, to savour it. At other times when the social world becomes more intense you focus on that sensual aspect of your experience which is external and public and so demands more control. Then the drug's effects become externalised and plays a role in the constructing the way you socialise. This latter effect was valued by my informants more than the former. They still had "ecstatic" moments, but they weren't as important to my informants as Malbon suggests they were to his. However, clubbing is an accumulative practice and therefore, over time, these intense states become more familiar, part of a person's sensual memory of clubbing and part of their expectations about the space; they are an intense part of learning how to club.

However, all the sensual qualities of the club space arise in relation to the sensual experiences that exist in the everyday world. As one informant explained:

"I work in front of a computer all week, sitting on my bum staring at this headache inducing screen with one eye on my boss. I quite like my job; it's not that so much; it's just that it's so still, but you can never really relax,

because it looks like you've fallen asleep or something. Then I get to go out at the weekend and dance and it's stunning, just moving and the music and the heat and my body feels like mine again." (Male)

This is a prime example of the importance of viewing dance in relation to other aspects of people's experience of their world. Already we can see that in terms of an individual's or group's sensual cartography the club space offers the chance to profoundly alter the everyday body of punters. It is released from the constrictions of the sober daylight "gaze", which stresses control and propriety. The body of capital is a rigid body, the mechanised body of work, upright, ordered. For some it is a sedentary body, which has its buttocks firmly rooted to a chair. For others it is a repetitive body, carrying out the same tasks over and over again, or it can be the strong but tired body of physical labour. Each body is ordered by the requirements of its work, by the expectations of bosses, by the rules of the corporation, by the habits of each job. People's bodies are controlled in time and in space, too still or slouched and they're lazy, too manic and they're disruptive. They must sit or stand for hours at a time, looking the part of the worker, even when they're dreaming of Caribbean seas and oral sex. Our minds can flee our job, our bodies must pass their allotted time in the space of work, even when we can't be bothered to actually do anything.

The dance drugs help to initiate this bodily shift in a number of ways. Speed and cocaine provide rushes of energy, which help punters shake off their everyday physicalities. Acid does the same thing, but via a somewhat different psycho-physical process. It is ecstasy, however, that became the dance drug and the reason why it gained this reputation was because of the way it energises people, while simultaneously altering their relationship to the crowd. Ecstasy reduces people's sense of fear and anxiety about other people. This is its primary effect upon which all the other elements of the ecstasy experience is built. Once people feel good in the crowd, once they stopped worrying about how that crowd perceives them, then dancing becomes much easier, because people are unafraid of expressing their experience through their bodies, which is the tool through which people communicate these feelings. What they actually communicate, when they're wrapped within the full force of the dance, is the feeling of being exquisitely and sensually ALIVE, more alive than they feel in many other areas of their lives. That sense of aliveness arises from a repossessing and re-sensualising your own body through the practice of dancing.

Music

“There’s only two types of music in this world, good music and bad music.” Charlie Parker.

Every culture has its music; it is a human universal and music has a profound effect on those cultural worlds. In this section I will primarily examine the sensual aspects of club music, its kinaesthetic and emotional dynamism, which makes it capable of uniting crowds and underpinning passionate and intense social experiences. The soundtrack of clubbing is eclectic and inventive; each musical style offers a subtle alteration in the experience of clubbing, from the soaring anthems of House, through the two step beat of Garage, to the luscious complexity of Asian beats and the sheer rhythmic force of Drum ‘n’ Bass, music’s sensual potential is embodied through the writhing, sweating, kinaesthetic dynamism of the crowd. The sheer power of music to bring people together, and radically shift the social and emotional timbre of the club space, is truly awesome. Its ability to act as a form of sonic adrenaline, that consistently re-energises the night, is equally impressive, as this example from my fieldwork diary reveals:

“5 o’clock in the morning, party’s dying down, handful of dancers on the floor everybody else crashed or chilling out. Then the DJ changes, a shift into Techno, those around the floor perk up; the dancers pick up the pace and then whoosh bodies start tumbling into the room and we’re off again.....Another lull, 7.30 in the morning everybody’s looking wasted; DJ changes; again I don’t hold out much hope for resuscitation, but I am wrong, deep Funk this time, another stampede and away we go. Eventually crawled out at 10 o’clock; brain a bit frazzled from the whizz and the E, but without the music the drugs wouldn’t have been enough on their own to keep me going.”

In “*Club Cultures*” Sarah Thornton (1995) examines music as a form of sub-cultural, a species of knowledge, that marks out the difference between club crowds. This is music as fashion and music as “distinction”, a way of showing your “hipness” to use Thornton’s terminology. In its most extreme form this approach ends up as the “trainspotter” view of music and amongst my informants this “trainspotter” reflex was predominantly viewed in a negative light. As one informant explained:

“I don’t like those hardcore Techno nights that are full of nodding blokes going, ‘Yeah tune, really obscure Derrick May remix blah blah blah’ and all that trainspotting shit. I hate it when people get all tight arsed about their

music; when they can't just kick back and let themselves loose, because they're too busy trying to spot a sample or guess the label, so they can show off how much bloody useless and obscure musical knowledge they know." (Male 32; 14 years experience.)

So although music does have a role to play, as a form of sub-cultural capital, this isn't its only or indeed its most important role in clubbing. Its most important role is to lift the crowd, to generate the euphoria and intensity of clubbing, to bring the crowd together and alter the way they experience both one another and the night as a whole. This aspect of music arises directly from its ability to become embodied, by that crowd, and to bring about profound changes in their emotional states.

Embodying the Beat

"If you think about the tunes too much you lose the ability to feel them and you've got to feel them; you've got to let them in, if you're really going to know them." (Female 34; 16 years experience.)

The intensity with which music can move people emotionally has been recognised by numerous commentators over the years. Both Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, at various stages in their philosophical careers, suggested that music could grant people profound and almost transcendent experiences, that provided one of the few ways in which life could be given meaning. One of my informants said:

"Music is one of the most important things in my life; it connects me to people, because I know I share this passion with them. It makes me feel incredible; it inspires me to dream; it helps me to make sense of my life. I couldn't live without it." (Female 34; 16 years experience.)

The "trainspotters" can talk about music until their tongues ache and their hips coagulate, but music only really begins to exist when it becomes embodied by the listener. Your heart soars, your spine tingles, you are infected by a beat that unleashes a profoundly emotional and utterly physical response. When a stunning new tune is dropped onto the deck it's like climbing into bed with somebody for the first time, you're hungry to experience its power, you want it to become part of your body. You often don't even notice this process occurring, until you're right there in the centre of the tune "givin' it some" for all you're worth, only then do you fully appreciate just how physically potent music can truly be. One informant described her relationship to music in these terms:

"Sometimes the music makes me insane; I can't stop dancing; it feels like my heart will pop; I'm covered in sweat, but the beat keeps driving me on. I

HAVE to dance, there's no other option the music's in control." (Female 32; 9 years experience.)

Music can possess the body as effectively as any demon or spirit, at times on the dancefloor it felt as if the music was dancing through me, ordering my movements, energising the core of my being until the boundaries between myself and the beat had evaporated.

In their book *"Music Grooves"*, Charles Kiel and Stephen Feld (1994) make an interesting observation:

"Common sense and day to day observation of children learning by doing as much as by thinking...have demonstrated quite convincingly that our muscles are perceptive. Somehow muscles remember... could it be that in many cultures children learn to listen when they learn to dance?" (Keil and Feld 1994:56)

This statement suggests that dance expands your affinity to music, by allowing you to build deeper and deeper physical relationships to it. Music ceases to be something that washes over your ears by becoming a corporeal force, that is expressed in your whole physical response to the tune. This is an intense and sensual relationship that can be playful, serious, funny, blissful and erotic simultaneously. Through people's responses to it music transcends sound and becomes material and tangible; a luscious physical affinity emerges that begins when you enter the heavily amplified space of the club. The amplification itself charges the air and pushes music deep into your guts. At times it felt like the sound could stop me breathing, because of the utter force of the bass boom emanating from the giant speaker stacks that surrounded me. It has often felt like I was dancing in treacle, because of the sheer weight of the sound hanging in the air. This musical charge permeates the room, so that even the non-dancers aren't immune to its corporeal allure their bodies are responding involuntarily, as the rhythm initiates alterations in their movements.

The social elements of clubbing are hugely important in terms of how you experience the music itself. Sharing music intensifies the way in which it affects you and the presence of music alters the way in which crowds relate to each other. The crowd and the beat nourish one another and the music exists as much through the body of the crowd as through its audible presence. As the crowd comes alive so do the tunes; you begin to see the smiles crack; the looks of amazement and excitement spread over people's faces; the sudden rush of recognition that sends someone hurtling onto the dancefloor; people singing along; giving it everything they've got; all participating, not only in the music, but in the night as a whole. Whether you're on the dancefloor, or on the sidelines, wallowing in the passionate embrace

of music, it pulls you into the club and into the other people, who are sharing this music, time and space with you.

The sheer volume is one of the important differences between club sounds and other music; it literally amplifies the music's presence in your bones. As you pass through the door of a club the boom of the bass slaps you in the face; it's a wake up call to the fact that you have entered an intense sensory environment where music, rather than existing as a background hum, has leapt to the foreground of perception. You can of course crank up your home stereo to get a similar effect, but that can bring hassle from your neighbours and the law, who can pile into your house and confiscate that stereo. Within clubs music is largely inescapable; it ceases to be heard and instead it becomes felt as a visceral, seductive form that had the power to:

“re-arrange your internal organs” (Female)

As one informant so succinctly put it. The glorious combination of amplification, sub-bass and accelerated beats charges the club environment with a palpable surge of sonic adrenaline, that has the power to unleash the Bacchanalian reflex in all but the most jaded of souls.

The seductive power of music is the force that allows it to become a form of sub-cultural capital. Music is not imbued with its sense of meaningfulness, via the endless labels and categories through which people classify it, but rather because it has the ability to generate and manipulate the realm of the sensual. It moves you physically, emotionally and mentally and as the next informant reveals the club space can deepen these properties:

“Clubbing's changed my attitude to music. I don't often listen to club music at home, but I'm more emotionally involved in all the music I listen to and I use music in a different way. I listen to all sorts of odd things. We played Robert Palmer yesterday. He's a bit of a joke now, but in the 1970s he wrote some of the most beautiful soul music the world's ever known and I'm prepared to give everything a go. I find myself buying all sorts of different music from different decades and getting emotionally involved and attached to it, in ways that I wouldn't have done had I not gone clubbing. It's not about only listening to clubbing music; it's about allowing music to get that close to you; you get very emotionally involved in music in a club and it seeps into your life; once you've felt the real power of music in a night-club, where you're allowed to express the way it moves you, then forever more you just experience music more intensely. I bet you find that most clubbers have really interesting top tens. I bet Burt Baccarach is in a lot of clubbers' top ten, because he creates beautiful songs. Even though club music breaks down the verse/chorus pattern and strips music down to a beat, you still get into the musicality of it. So when you're at home and you fancy a bit of verse/chorus you can appreciate it more. It made me less tolerant of the pop stuff. Me and my friends, who go clubbing, when we're

at home we tend to listen to real classic, great songwriters, while people who don't go clubbing, they're prepared to put up with Blur or Steps." (Male 32; 14 years experience.)

Clubs made him experience music in a different way because of the way in which music affected him at an emotional and visceral level while in the club space. This is music as a viscous, material force, that penetrates deep into people's emotional core and either radically alters or powerfully reflects the way they feel in the world. Club music uses certain techniques and technical resources to intensify the already potent physical and emotional effects, that it can have on both individuals and groups. In the next section I will examine two of these aspects of club music which mark it out as different from the majority of mainstream beats.

Bass

If I believed in god, then that god would take the form of a bass beat. Raw, guttural and sublime the bass enfolds and possesses; it is the heartbeat of clubbing, both archaic and wise, infusing time and space with the organicism of a living thing. The arrival of sub-bass heralded an intensification of the cult of bass, once only explored in its most extreme manifestation via Dub, it began to creep into the realm of dance music, as more and more musicians recognised its awesome power to move people both physically and emotionally. The advances in sound recording and reproduction, that have occurred in the current electronic age of music, allowed bass to reach a visceral zenith that sank deep into the flesh of those who experienced its intoxicatory allure.

Such a bass has the ability to sculpt air and charge it with an electrostatic frisson, which makes it tangible to touch, akin to being immersed in water. The driving power of this subcutaneous force is a source of energy in itself; it hits your gut, genitals and chest with a kinetic surge of desire that can, at times, become so intense that it is physically overwhelming and you're forced to turn away for fear of puking. A pumping bass beat launches you onto the floor before you've even thought about it; its immediacy is lascivious and virulent and the rhythm it carries infects entire rooms.

One informant, a Rastafarian women, I met at a Dub night explained that:

"Bass is a communal thing for Rastas; it immediately links you to people and to Jah. There is obviously no scriptural reference to bass, just a shared feeling that brings you together and makes you all one."

The emotional power of bass is derived from its material quality that enfolds the listener within the tune. Sometimes it is heavy and dark like someone's creeping up behind you, possibly with an axe clutched in their sweaty psycho paws, at others it's exhilarating like the kick bass of Techno, which imbues you with instant energy, that makes dancing feel like a form of sonic surfing. One informant explained how she:

“was knackered before I came out and I wasn't in the mood for drugs, but I knew I'd have a good time when I got here, so I made the effort even though I didn't feel up to it. The minute the bass hit all that tiredness just went and I was off. I can't resist it. I just love hearing that bass.”

The act of living is rhythmic, from the beat of our hearts to the ordering of our time we adopt rhythms in the form of habits. The way we walk down the street, how we pass our working day, when we eat and sleep, they all become rhythms that suffuse our sense of being-in-the-world. These everyday rhythms are embodied in our physicality and our movements, yet they can be disrupted by a counter rhythm and the force of the bass beat has the power to create such as disruption. The deeply sensual quality of bass, its material succulence, penetrates the flesh almost like an alternative heartbeat that initiates a new physicality. Dub uses slow, stoned rhythms, but Drum n Bass or Techno combines the power of bass with an acceleration which lifts the body. This force is infectious; it drives you on and energises the entire club space. As an informant commented:

“You can completely feel bass and nine times out of ten, when you're drug fucked, they could turn the treble off and you'd hardly notice it had gone. You don't follow the treble, when you're dancing, you follow the mid-range and the bass. With bass you can get so immersed in the sound that you can't even see; it just fills you up.” (Male 26; 8 years experience.)

Clubs encourage such physical change; the intoxication, the crowds and the music all act together to create new physical and emotional rhythms. Alternative experiences of self in world. Bodies shift, they throw off the rhythmic constraints of everyday life, they mutate physically, mentally and emotionally and generate a direct experience of an alternative self: energised, potent, powerful. One of the hallowed mandates of clubbing is that clubs are places in which you can be yourself, but that self must cast off the fears and insecurities that are carried within the physicality of the body.

Music offers one of the lures which tempt punters from their own habituated flesh; the viral beat infects them to their physical core, unlocking bodies through a process of seduction, that resonates in muscles, sinew and skin, re-orientating their physical and mental sense of being. All aspects of clubbing combine in a holistic surge of liberation, that resonates across

the group and flickers within the individual, coaxing them out from behind the defensive physicality which keeps the social intensity of the metropolis at bay. As an informant explained:

“It feels so different in a club than anywhere else; your body relaxes, but it’s not a sinking form of relaxation; it’s full of energy and a lot of that comes from the beats and they just power you on; you feel strong, if you know what I mean.” (Male.)

Acceleration

Western music has got faster, the combination of the club space, the intoxicants and the technology, behind the music itself, has radically increased the Beats Per Minute (BPM) of clubs’ tunes. One informant explained BPM rates manifested themselves as alternative styles of club music:

“Different styles of music attract different people for different reasons. The regular House, Garage scene is sort of 130 BPM, which is roughly 1.5 times the resting heart rate of the average person. It’s easy to get into; you’re not getting too hot and sweaty; you can have a little dance; it’s slow enough that the women get to shake their booty without losing it.

When you move on to the Underground Garage of today, which is again about 130 BPM, but it’s a two step beat, it feels slower; it’s not slower; if you hook up a BPM counter to it some of it’s coming in at 140, 145, which is Trance, but because it’s a two step beat you only hit every other beat, so you can still give it some without getting too sweaty. That’s the thing with this sort of crowd, if you go to a House or Garage club they’re very much into the way they look. They have to look very neat, precise; they’ve got their D and G, dodgy banana; they’ve got their Ralph Laurens and Moshino and that’s fair enough, go for it, but they don’t want to drench it in sweat so they end up looking a bit bedraggled, do they?

Then you get House music, for the purists like Progressive House; it’s a little bit faster, but it’s mainly for people who are into the technical thing; they’re listening for the mix, this bit, that bit; they’re not really there to enjoy themselves; 99 times out of 100 they’re with the media, coked out of their brains; you know the ones that get media flu on a Monday morning.

Then you get Trance and Progressive Trance, which is what the latest Trance DJ thing is called. That’s the euphoria level three stuff; it’s fun; it’s faster 140 BPM; you’re dancing around bang, boing, boing, boing. Once you get passed that stuff then you start getting into Hard House, Hard Trance. For me, when you get somebody who knows what they’re doing on the decks, with Hard House and Hard Trance, that’s my level. It’s also NRG which means they play it slightly faster, 140 record banged up to 155. That’s when you can’t care how you look; you’re listening to the music; you’re going for it; people are supposedly into Hard House this year. ‘Mixmag’ defined Hard House as a bassier version of House, but anyone in London, who knows Trade, knows that Hard House is faster and less jangly,

less piano more bonk bonk bonk. It's kind of grit your teeth music, but you can still smile as you grit them." (Male 26; 8 years experience.)

The process of acceleration increased the intensity of the music, not at an emotional level, all forms of music are capable of unleashing profound emotional responses, that quality isn't related to its speed, it intensified music at a kinaesthetic level. The musicologist Gabrielsson (1984) suggested that all rhythm was possessed of inherently kinetic properties; a classification he has extended to cover both real and implied motionality. This implied or imaginative motion is increased in the accelerated realm of club tunes. When you're watching a Trance crowd go off they don't necessarily seem to be moving any faster than a House crowd, particularly on crowded dancefloor, but from my own experience, and from watching countless crowds, accelerated beats seem to intensify the sense of self in motion in the mind. The implied kinaesthetic quality of the beat makes people feel they're moving more than they actually are. In a crowd situation this is intensified even further, because your own movements occur within a sea of movement, especially if you're shifting your head a lot as you dance. As one informant said after seeing herself dancing on video in a crowd:

"I was really surprised at how little I was moving; it felt like I was really going for it, but my body's actually moving quite slowly and I'm moving my head much more than I thought I was, but I remember that particular point in the night and at the time it felt like I was really pushing my dancing." (Female 30; 11 years experience.)

The kinetic qualities of the beat intensify your perception of your own body and add to your sense of bodily acceleration. The beat infects both body and mind; it exists as a combination of mental schema and bodily practice, that together creates the experience of dance. The faster the beat the more frenzied your dancing feels; it magnifies the sensation of the body. It is important to remember that the BPM is not the only connection people make to a tune. Music has different characteristics, speed is only one dimension of dancing, and dancing won't necessarily feel better or more fulfilling because you're dancing to fast music. I believe we are simply talking about a sense of "frenzy" here and not everybody wants to experience that sense of "frenzy". One informant described his experience of accelerated beats on the dancefloor in these terms:

"When the beats really get cranked up it feels like a sonic strobe light going off in your head; it just pushes you on; it feels chaotic, but it's great."
(Male)

As the beats get faster the experience of dancing to them changes; in general the faster the beat the more internalised the sense of dancing becomes, which alters the social dynamic of the dancefloor. People enter their own world of dance, there's less direct social contact, but you can still feel the weight and presence of the crowd, so it is still a social and shared experience. As you push the kinaesthetic limits of your own body, and feel the passion of the music suffusing your flesh, your consciousness contracts. As one informant explained:

"I love losing it on the dancefloor, when I'm just going for it and it's hot and I'm just feeling the music and my dancing and that's all that seems to exist really." (Female 41; 19 years experience.)

I watched one woman dancing on top of the speakers for at least 4 hours, stopping only occasionally to drink some water, physically matching the beats, staring out over the crowds, but seemingly without really noticing them. However, you can feel the crowd moving around you and that crowd is linked through the experience of the beat; it's a tangible kinetic rush that drives them on and on and on. As one informant explained:

"To a certain extent you make yourself as an individual smaller, less, and you become part of this mass; it's a collective experience. In the same way as the hypnotic type, voodoo, drumming ceremonies it is the nearest contemporary Western people can get to those quasi trance experiences and time does funny things to you and you get this feeling of pure energy. Energy in yourself and feeding off everyone else's energy and feeding off the music, the rhythm of the night." (Male 32; 14 years experience.)

This is a point of deep sensual connection to yourself, the crowd, the music. The sense of energy flowing through your veins makes you feel exquisitely alive and supercharged. Acceleration offers another point of sensual expansion, another intense physical encounter, that has become mainstream in the contemporary world.

Chemical Beats

There is a symbiotic relationship between music and drugs. They feed into and reflect one another, whether it's the deeply stoned skanking beats of Dub, the coked up freneticism of Jungle, the heart soaring ecstasy drenched anthems of House, or the amphetamine fuelled beats of Hardcore Techno, the experience of taking drugs is reflected in the soundtrack of clubbing. Drugs can intensify the way you experience music. They generate an alternative sensual dimension from within which music is encountered or produced. The above quote, about how clubbing had deepened people's passion for music and intensified their sense of

connection to it reflects this affinity between drugs and music. My informant felt that clubbing made him more emotionally connected to his music and this particular informant enjoyed his club drugs.

The drugs and the music make sense of one another in many ways; they alter the way the music occupies your body, particularly when dancing. The accelerant quality of drugs has played a role in making dance music sensually comprehensible, by generating a physicality that could match its intensity. As one informant explained:

“I just didn’t get dance music when I first heard it, especially the real hardcore stuff; it was only after I listened to it in a club, on drugs, and danced to it that it began to make sense to me and now I love it and I can listen to it without being drugged up.” (Female 31; 13 years experience.)

Another said:

“I don’t know what it is about drugs and music but they work together; it’s like the drugs helps you let the music in.” (Male)

Drugs alters people’s experience of music, both inside and outside of the club arena. The drugs, music and dancing triptych generates an alternate sensual plain, that allows people to build different relationships between these three seductive forms. The music affects the dancing, the drugs effect the music, the dancing alters the way people feel the drugs and the music. All these relationships are deeply embodied and participatory; they effect punters at a physical, emotional and mental level. People experience these shifts as a point of heightened intensity; they become deep-participants, who participate from within a radically altered sensual perspective. However, this level of participation is a bodily technique that can move beyond the club space. It can permanently alter the way music is received by the listener; they learn how to “listen to” and “feel” music in different way.

Part of this shift in relationship has a Pavlovian quality; the beats exist not only as a type of music, but instead become inextricably linked to the experience of clubbing. As one informant pointed out:

“I love dancing to good music, that just makes my body tingle and it makes you stand up and wriggle; you just can’t sit down to this tune. Yes there are points when you’re just too tired to get up and dance to it, but you can still wriggle in your chair and wobble and feel it pulsate through your body. It has the effect that if you dance to a good tune for the first time and it’s fabulous and you peak out, then you hear it on the radio or something a week later, those feelings rush back into your body, not at the same level, but you definitely feel that euphoria again just by listening to the music. Your body seems to clock it before your mind does.” (Female 41; 19 years experience.)

Music's ability to create a profoundly emotional response in people is at its strongest when that music becomes part of a person's biography. Hearing a dance tune in another environment could still bring back at least some of the euphoria of clubbing; it becomes an emotional marker, a trigger like Pavlov's bell, but this is an act of self conditioning to a response. It becomes a point of connection back to the good times, you find yourself smiling, bouncing along and generally feeling groovy as you reconnect to the sensual states which clubbing underpins. It reminds you that life can feel good even when the situation you're in may not be so hot.

Conclusions

Music has always been imbued with passionately sensual and emotional qualities for the listener. The club environment and advances in musical technology has intensified some of these qualities. The viscous and energising properties of bass, the shift into accelerated rhythms and the experience of feeling music while on drugs has altered the way music is received by clubbers. It has become kinaesthetically charged and rhythmic which made it easier to dance to. People's relationship to music has become more physically intense; it is embodied via dance and not just through listening to it, again there is nothing particularly new about this phenomenon it is simply a matter of scale.

The club experience and the music combine in memory. Club tunes can unleash an almost Pavlovian response, because they are intimately linked to the sensual biography of clubbers. They re-ignite part of the rush of clubbing, its kinaesthetic and emotional properties, and this experience brings the sense of having lived and of having had a good time back to clubbers. The music exists as a soundtrack of pleasure, of being amongst people, sharing good times with them, feeling good. It helps keep the sensual knowledge of clubbing alive by acting as an emotional referent, which can be experienced at other times and other spaces away from the club environment. This is important because the realm of the sensual is not remembered in the same way as ideas. The memory of the emotional content of clubbing can dissipate over time. It can leak from the flesh. Music can reverse this process and bring it "all flooding back" even if it does so in a somewhat gentler form.

Intoxication

“as fisherman imbibe heavily and become somewhat inebriated they do not thereby lose control over their immediate circumstances or indeed abandon their sense of judgement. On the contrary, it is precisely under such circumstances that they are in a position to grasp effectively the fluid and complex realities of their world.”

(A.Peace in Dimitra Gefou-Madianou 1992:179)

Intoxication plays an important role in clubbing by initiating the alterations in people's sense of self, that marks out leisure time as different from their other experiences of the world. Over the last 350 years, since the adoption and usage of laudanum as a medical wonder cure became commonplace, the range of experiences offered by intoxicants in the West has undergone a process of change, that I believe is best viewed as a radical shift in the sensual parameters of human experience. In this chapter I want to explore the way in which this sensual shift has played a role in altering people's experience of the world, themselves and the social relations which they form. I have used the term intoxication, because I want to examine all the drugs used by clubbers and this includes alcohol. This split between the legality of alcohol and the illegality of other drugs is grounded in a somewhat arbitrary dividing line, that has legal ramifications but doesn't have a lot of meaning in the club arena itself. Clubbers use alcohol, both on its own and in combination with other drugs, and the inclusion of these other drugs changes the effects that alcohol has on individuals and groups.

My informants' perspectives upon intoxication had changed over time, as had the way in which they used intoxicants. This allowed me to view a long term pattern of drug and alcohol use that altered with the changing lives of my informants, both in terms of the club experiences, they sort out, and the alterations in their lives, that occurred away from the club space. My informants displayed a high degree of chemical literacy (a term I will unpack in greater detail later in this chapter) in that they tailored their use of drugs and alcohol to create a range of different experiences, rather than only seeking to “get out of their boxes” through the use of intoxicants. This shift in usage was most intimately connected to a growing stress on the importance of the social aspects of clubbing, that began to subsume their desire to focus on a drug experience and push that drug experience to its limits.

“Every fucker and their dog take drugs”

One of the problems we have is that drug taking has now become so commonplace it is widely regarded as socially acceptable.” (Martin Plant, Director of the Alcohol and Health Research Centre, quoted in The Guardian 20/2/01)

All but one of my informants used drugs to varying degrees, for some of them clubbing was inextricably linked to taking drugs which provided a foundational part of the experience. They recognised the potential pitfalls of drugs, while still valuing what they offered and the types of experience they underpinned. The majority of my informants said that their drug experiences were largely positive; they were glad that they had discovered and taken drugs, even when they had ceased to do so. This perspective is obviously at odds with the accepted view of drug use that is articulated by legal and medical authorities. Drugs are a “scourge”, a “plague” and the irrepressible enemy in an ongoing “war on drugs”, the very possibility that they offer anything of value is consistently and vociferously denied. Despite this rhetoric drugs are becoming part of mainstream experience and are used as much by young, successful professionals as they are by the disenchanted poor. In statistical terms it is true that more people haven’t taken illegal drugs as have, yet amongst younger age groups the percentage that have taken drugs rises dramatically. A recent survey by Dr Plant’s research centre (2000) concluded that a third of 15-16 year olds had taken some form of illegal drug and that British teenagers were more likely to have taken drugs than any other group of teenagers in Europe. However, this research is not the main reason I would contend that drugs are becoming mainstream, that belief arises from the way in which people talk about them. They are no longer associated with a small group of rebels and outlaws, who exist at the edge of culture; they are not the preserve of bohemians or artists or sad broken people trapped in appalling lives and desperately seeking escape. They’re not even particularly rebellious, although their position outside of the law means that they have maintained some kudos as a criminal activity amongst younger users, although this gradually disappears as users age and their illegal status is perceived of as a “bit of naughtiness”, or a “pain in the arse”, rather than a counter cultural statement. Drugs are referenced in art, literature and television where their presence, alongside sex, is used to demarcate a programme’s audience as young and hip. Late night T.V., in particular, uses styles of humour that informants classed as “utterly stoned” and visual techniques that were “tripped out”. As one informant said:

“Why do you think the Clangers are on at four in the morning; it’s got sod all to do with nostalgia; it’s because it appeals to drug fucked people who’ve just got in and their heads are still fizzing. You can see the change especially at the week-ends, the programmes start when the pubs kick out; they tend to be viewing for drunks and as the night goes on they get less drunk and far druggier. It’s comedown T.V. for a drugged up nation and the T.V. companies know their market and cater to it. They’d never admit it of course, but it isn’t very surprising considering the amount of drugs that the media world consumes; they’re like Dysons stuck on maximum suck, so of course they know what’s going to appeal to their fellow druggies.” (Male 31; 13 years experience.)

This is an interesting statement as it suggests that the presence of drugs in the media isn’t only indicated by specific references to drugs, but is revealed through the organisation of programme schedules, which reflect a particularly druggy sensibility or, like The Clangers, get reinterpreted in relation to the viewer’s drug fuelled state of mind. Drug use occurs in all social, economic and ethnic groupings although there are differences in the types of drugs used and the patterns which surround their use.

The most common illegal drug in circulation is cannabis, which a number of informants didn’t even think of as a drug anymore, just a way of unwinding after work. As one informant suggested:

“Spliff’s not a drug, well it’s not like the Class As anyway, it’s very different. It’s just a way of chilling out. My work’s emotionally intense; it’s draining; I’m dealing with people who need constant care, attention and support; people who are dying or have become profoundly disabled and when I get in I like to have a spliff, because it helps me leave it behind and if I didn’t get that emotional break it would be a lot harder to deal with the job. I’m not talking about getting out of it every night, that doesn’t interest me; I’m just talking about relaxing.” (Female 32; 9 years experience.)

This woman wanted to relax, in the same way as someone consuming a couple of glasses of wine wants to relax; she felt cannabis offered her that ability and she valued it for that reason. None of my informants thought that cannabis should be illegal and most agreed that by keeping it illegal the government was creating more problems than they solved. The excuse that cannabis is seen as a “gateway drug” to other drugs was ridiculed, because this gateway effect, even if it does exist, was created more by its illegal nature than any property inherent in the drug. Certainly from my own experience the first time I smoked cannabis I realised that I had been consistently lied to, by the anti-drugs propaganda of the state, and as an inquisitive person I went on to try most of the other drugs available, because I wanted to make up my own mind about them.

The more people experience drugs for themselves the more ridiculous the gap between their own experiences and the rhetoric, used by the state, is perceived to be and clubbers just don't believe anything the authorities say about drugs anymore. This complete abandonment of any trust is a destructive situation, because all my informants stressed that drugs do need to be used with care and the more knowledge people receive and, most importantly, trust the safer they will eventually become. All my informants took drugs and had done for a number of years; all supported themselves; only one had ever had to seek medical help in relation to their use of drugs; none had ever stolen to fund their drug use. They all agreed drugs could be problematic, some said that they had used them excessively at times in their lives, but they had realised this and had taken steps to alter their patterns of usage. What interested me is how the experience of taking drugs had affected the lives of my informants, the types of experiences they had encountered, the social worlds in which they exist and the potential pitfalls they have discovered.

Set and Setting

It is important to remember that the "set and setting", in which intoxicants are consumed, will play an important part in creating the subsequent experience of those intoxicants. Timothy Leary coined the notion of "set and setting" when he undertook his early experiments in psychedelics, but the rule holds true for all intoxicants. "Set and setting" refers to:

" "Set" refers to the user's state of mind, his personality, his expectations and any memory material which may surface when he is under the drug. "Setting" is a term used to designate the environmental factors that might influence the occasion-other people present, selection of music, comfort, locale, aesthetic background....By properly understanding the concept of "set and setting" it is possible to "program" a session for particular goals." (Stafford and Golightly 1970:217)

From my own experiences, I would stress the importance of being amongst the right people in creating the best possible setting for taking drugs. The idea of setting shows the importance of the club space, the crowds, the aesthetics and the sheer energy of clubbing in shaping a person's experience of intoxication, no matter what that intoxicant is. Clubs house different ways of having a good time with people and the look and feel of a club space plays an important role in "programming" the night and orientating people towards particular pleasurable goals and experiences. For example psychedelic clubs and cocaine clubs are

marked out by radically alternate aesthetics. One is derived from the psychedelic experience and the way it makes you perceive colour; the other mirrors the social models that surround cocaine usage.

Research from psychology backs up the importance of “set and setting” in shaping the experience of intoxication, even when they are not psychedelic experiences. In the early 1960s Stanley Schachter and Jerome Singer (1962) administered doses of adrenaline to test subjects and then placed them within alternate emotional settings. As LeDoux explains in *“The Emotional Brain”*:

“The subjects were then exposed to either a pleasant, unpleasant, or emotionally neutral situation. As predicted, mood varied in accord with the context for the subjects given adrenaline but not for the control group that received placebo injections: adrenaline-treated subjects exposed to a joyful situation came out feeling happy, those exposed to an unpleasant situation came out feeling sad, and the neutral ones felt nothing in particular.” (LeDoux 1999:48)

During another experiment that was carried out by Dr Harriet de Witt at the University of Chicago and shown as part of the BBC documentary *Brain Story*, subjects were told they would receive either a placebo or a dose of amphetamine and that they would be told which was which. Unbeknownst to them the placebo also contained amphetamine. The people who were told they would get amphetamine, and did, enjoyed themselves giggling, chatting and joking to the video camera. The ones who got the fake placebo, containing amphetamine, became nervous, tense and worried. This “spiking” experiment would be frowned upon by my informants; it would be seen as a nasty trick to play. People usually know they have taken an intoxicant, without that knowledge the bodily changes the intoxicant initiates would be interpreted as a “natural” state, people would feel weird, they’d wonder if they were all right or feeling sick, they’d get worried. This lab based test does not capture the actual practice of taking intoxicants in the real world, when prior knowledge is vital to the subsequent experience of becoming intoxicated and clubbing. So to remove it gives a false impression of the actualities of taking drugs, which occur within social groupings, in particular spaces and within specific ideas about the type of experience people want. Finally these experiments have focused upon simple arousal drugs, like adrenaline and amphetamine, whereas research into psychedelics would suggest they offer an experience that goes way beyond simple arousal and that they play a more intense role in colouring the subsequent state of intoxication. It would still be unpleasant to someone who

didn't know they'd taken the drug, but the power of psychedelics would make the experience far more intense and bizarre.

Club Intoxicants

In this section I want to briefly examine each of the club drugs in turn, in order to tease out the differences and similarities between them, as well as the types of experience that they play a role in creating

Alcohol

“Singing lager, lager ,lager” (The Underworld: Born Slippy)

After a very brief and partial displacement in the late 1980s and early 1990s, as the drug which fuels people's leisure activities, alcohol has come back into vogue in clubland, although it has to be said that rumours of its demise were certainly premature and, outside of the ecstasy fuelled rave scene, it was still the drug of choice for the majority of Britain's population. For most of us alcohol is our first introduction to intoxication and it is through alcohol use that we discover our ability to alter the way we feel in a particular environment. It is the most socially acceptable of all the drugs, to the point where people, who espouse a virulent anti-drug philosophy, will get quite upset if you decline a drink from them and view it as an anti-social act. Take Ann Widdecombe's ridiculous “zero tolerance” speech at the 2000 Tory party conference, which was immediately washed down with a celebratory bottle of bubbly; obviously even she likes to feel a little fizzy at times. Drug use is classified in terms of an intoxicant's illegality; most drinkers don't perceive of themselves as drug users and research aimed at drugs often ignores the presence of alcohol. It is interesting to note that when positing a relationship between soft and hard drugs alcohol is conveniently left out of the reckoning and marijuana is used as a base line for the soft drug side of the equation. The idea that alcohol teaches people about intoxication, and makes other states of intoxication experientially comprehensible, would challenge the simplistic trajectory that asserts a substances legality is the major element that defines its position within the drug user's pharmacological arsenal.

As we have seen the social feel of Britains nightlife radically altered with the arival of raves and ecstasy as it shifted away from the social models which underpinned drinking

clubs. Alcohol had played a huge role in creating and constraining these drinking environments and its influence was strongly related to the social models which surrounded its use. It was very much part of the system, easily accessible and socially acceptable, except when linked to violence or alcoholism. The licensing laws that surrounded its use meant that clubs shut down at 2am and pubs at 11pm, which created a situation in which a large part of the club experience was based around finding a place to keep drinking, rather than searching out anything novel or even fancying a dance.

So the vast majority of clubs were far more an extension of the pub environment than a completely separate space offering a radically different experience. As one informant explained:

“I don’t think you can connect those old lager fuelled clubs with club culture, as it stands now; it was completely different. The arrival of ecstasy took it to whole different worlds; it got rid of much of the violence. The Friday and Saturday night ‘get lagered up and have a fight thing’ blighted clubs. Younger clubbers don’t realise how far clubs have come, how different they are; I used to find myself in pissed up clubs thinking, ‘Shit I just don’t want to be here, this place feels vicious.’ (Male 25; 8 years experience.)

Although drinking has returned to clubs it has changed because it is often a chemically assisted practice; people drink and take drugs something which went out of fashion when ecstasy was at its height, because ecstasy and booze don’t mix very well. However, cocaine and speed can easily be mixed with alcohol. As one informant told me.

“Drink and speed mix really well; you become an indestructible drinker and you don’t get that downer, maudlin bit that drink on its own can give you.”
(Male)

Cocaine actually binds with alcohol to produce a chemical blend of ethanol and cocaine called ethocaine which means that booze and cocaine compliment one another. As one informant said:

“I like a few beers when I’m on coke; it’s a nice combination; it mellows the buzz and anyway I like the way you can wash the coke, that trickles down your throat, away with the beer I like the taste as they mix.” (Male)

The energy both these drugs supply changes the experience of drinking quite radically. It reduces the depressive qualities of alcohol and keeps drinkers energised until the early hours of the morning. The first people to leave a club are often the ones who are only drinking and there seems to be a point, at around 2-3 in the morning, when they collapse leaving other chemically assisted clubbers still rocking the dancefloor. One of the most common drinks in

clubs was vodka and Redbull, which tastes like the worst cough medicine you can imagine, but has the advantage of supplying both caffeine and Taurine, both of which are uppers that again holds off alcohol's depressant quality, though nowhere near as effectively as the class As.

The return of alcohol into clubs has made clubbing a more accessible experience to many people, particularly the ones who had been kept away by the relationship between clubs and drugs. Whereas a drinker would have felt out of place in the old ecstasy orientated clubs, which sometimes didn't even have a bar where you could buy booze, they can feel right at home in contemporary clubs. There is a definite split between the vibe you get in a club that's predominantly dependent upon alcohol as its intoxicant, and ones where other drugs are being used. This split is created in two ways, firstly because of the actual effects of the different drugs and secondly because of the alternate social models that surround their usage.

As Maryon McDonald asserts:

"A state of drunkenness will be defined differently cross culturally, the meaning of drunkenness varies, and the behaviour which alcohol induces is a cultural matter, rather than a question of the inevitable or natural consequences of ethanol entering the bloodstream...drunkenness is learned behaviour." (McDonald 1994:13)

This gives us the strong version of the cultural constructivist view of alcohol. However, after reading the text, I can't say I came across any real indication that people got drunk in vastly different ways depending upon where they lived. So I would have to temper this perspective to say that cultures construct different models of intoxication, but they do so within the parameters of the physiological effects of the intoxicant. There are limits to the way cultures can structure and interpret drunkenness and all cultures recognised the fact that drunkenness was very different from sobriety and that alcohol does indeed possess the ability to alter people's behaviour. Cultures do indeed structure drinking in different ways, but once that drinking becomes drunkenness, that is when they reach the point where the effects of ethanol are strongest, these models display a striking similarity in the forms of behaviour that are associated with alcohol.

The social models that surrounded alcohol use in this country have been around so long that they were largely stagnant. They were heavily gendered and predominantly masculine models of behaviour which reflected ideas about class, taste, social decorum and ways of interacting socially. In *"Alcohol, Gender and Culture"*, Dimitra Gefou-Madianou shows that women's intoxication was viewed more harshly than men's, although plenty of women still knew how to drink and have a good time. However, heavy drinking was still perceived

as a predominantly male activity and men were granted a certain licence for their behaviour when drunk, while women weren't extended the same luxury. In Britain the social model of drunkenness recognised that drinking altered people's behaviour, but much of those alterations were viewed negatively. It recognised the disinhibiting potential of alcohol, but was constantly fearful and suspicious of these changes in people's behaviour. Drunkenness was viewed with suspicion, it was seen as potentially dangerous, something which could exacerbate people's behaviour and undermine social order. As Maryon McDonald points out:

“When we talk disapprovingly about ‘drugs’ we are talking in priority about perceived threats to the social and moral order, threats which have been medicalised and on which a whole scientific edifice has been built.”
(McDonald 1994:17)

Drunkenness was associated with promiscuity, violence and self destructive behaviour, as much as it was linked to people having a good time. This perspective strongly reflected the traditional Christian and Protestant view that pleasure is a dangerous force. The model of the social drinker was always linked to sobriety, more than it was connected to the state of drunkenness; it was a model of control and propriety with no space for such notions as abandonment and the radical intensification of pleasure. People ignored these models frequently; they found a sense of liberation and the experience of an altered social self by drinking, but the nature of the alcohol hit is eventually depressive and it can't offer the same rushes of energy associated with other drugs that, in themselves, can radically alter people's experience of their world. You can find abandonment, excess, and a damned good time through booze, until you reach the point where your co-ordinations gone, the room's spinning, or you've become completely unaware of what you're doing. One informant made this comparison:

“You get a loss of inhibition on other drugs, but not in the same way as alcohol, because you're still much more aware of what's going on; alcohol blunts all the edges, whereas E, speed or cocaine doesn't do that; they intensify and magnify your experience and your awareness and alertness is a far greater for far longer.” (Female 32; 9 years experience.)

The difference between drinking now and drinking prior to the growth in illegal drug use is the added edge of the uppers. We've moved from being a nation that uses a depressant, as its party drug of choice, to one which wants a decidedly more up-beat experience when they're in the club environment. Clubbers don't want to collapse at 2 in the morning; they

want to party all night and alcohol alone tends to restrict that possibility rather than facilitate it.

From Alcohol to Ecstasy and Beyond

The arrival of ecstasy changed the social and sensual feel of a night out; it intensified the whole experience and introduced more and more people to this intensity, while setting it within a radically altered social framework. Clubs ceased to be late night drinking dens with dancing and developed their own identity distinct from the pub model of social interaction, which had dominated the social realm of clubbing up until the late 1980s. As one informant explained:

“Pubs are quite territorial; I’ve never really met anyone in a pub, that’s not why I go there; I go with my friends and I stay with my friends and people don’t mingle like they do in a club. So you never get that feel that everyone’s there to just go for it. I find pubs quite boring to be honest. Drinking crowds don’t seem to gel like druggy crowds in that people can behave very differently from one another when drunk, some get talkative and excited, some get depressed, some lose their co-ordination completely or become aggressive and leery. Even clubs get that cattle market feel back when people are just drinking; they lose a lot of their energy if there’s too many people who are just drunk and I think a lot of that is to do with the fact that alcohol is a bit of a shit drug really, in that it can’t keep up with the club buzz; it gets too messy and people lose control. After all club spaces weren’t really designed with drunks in mind were they? They were designed to house drugs and they didn’t really appeal to drinkers, but now they’re getting swamped by drunks.” (Female 32; 9 years experience.)

Alcohol is an old drug and the social models that surrounded its use have been around for an equally long time. However, ecstasy was a new drug which spread with amazing rapidity and I would argue that its physiological effects, such as raised empathy, a loss of inhibition and fear etc, played a massive role in the way it altered the social model of the night out. When ecstasy first arrived there were two models of usage associated with it. The first was derived from the American therapeutic community, (See Saunders 1995 126-137) who saw it as a useful psychological tool particularly during marriage guidance sessions. The second grew out of its incorporation into the club space, but both stressed and utilised the same physiological properties to create different perspectives upon its potential uses.

Its swift incorporation in to the rave/party scene altered the social experience of these spaces to such a profound extent that ravers derided alcohol use and abandoned it on mass. The “*luvved up*” vibe of ecstasy gave clubs the feel of inclusivity and attracted a crowd

who'd had been put off the club space, because of its "snobbery", economic exclusivity and drunken violence. They had found an alternate experience of socialising with other people, particularly strangers, but also, as we shall see later in this work, their own friends. In the early years of rave/club culture that social experience and the sheer Dionysian excess of the parties themselves was revelatory and it generated highly idealistic and utopian dreams of the future. By the mid-nineties these dreams became far more pragmatic, until clubbing became viewed as an intense leisure option, one amongst many, but certainly not a revolutionary practice. However, as my next informant points out the nightlife experience had changed:

"I think the atmosphere's changed in dance clubs in particular even when they're not all on ecstasy; if you go to say an Indy club you realise how much better the general atmosphere of dance clubs really are. You really do. Even the dance clubs that you think are a bit moody and underground still have a much better atmosphere than other clubs. I think ecstasy showed people that a night out didn't have to end in a fight. I think it still does."
(Male 27; 10 years experience.)

From my observations in the field I'd suggest that the hardcore, clubby, druggy crowd, who then started pulling away from the ecstasy gig and moved back into drinking and taking cocaine, brought an altered social model to that drug combination. They still want to be in a social space that maintains some of the qualities of the ecstasy experience, in terms of how they interact with one another by smiling, being tolerant, an absence of violence etc, however, they set about achieving this social experience through drinking and snorting a few lines. Cocaine and speed are incredibly chatty drugs, although they don't imbue that chattiness with the same emotional openness and sense of trust that is associated with ecstasy, but then neither do they leave the user as fragile and vulnerable as ecstasy can. When mixed with alcohol the accelerants provide a socially intense, yet less psychedelic, experience of clubland that doesn't initiate such a radical shift in their sense of self. Compared to the mutational rush of psychedelics, the booze and upper mix can feel like a relatively sober experience, after night after night of being E'd up or tripping "out yer gourd".

Ecstasy

3,4 MethylendioxyNmethylamphetamine, M.D.M.A, ecstasy the drug that underpinned many people's experiences in raves and then clubs was invented in 1912 by the German

pharmaceutical company Merck, although they never marketed it. The use of ecstasy has increased over the years and it would be wrong to try and continue to use the ecstasy experience to sum up people's club experiences. I visited plenty of clubs where ecstasy wasn't the predominant hit and others where people were under the effect of a variety of drugs in a single space. Nevertheless, when you do come across a room full of people whooping it up on ecstasy then you find yourself looking at a space which bears the most obvious relation to the original rave experience. The average price ranges from £5-£10 a pill depending on how many you buy.

In this section I will use my informants' descriptions of their own ecstasy experiences to illustrate the social and individual changes that ecstasy facilitates. I have broken these down into 3 sub headings that reveal different aspects of those experiences.

Unravelling Fear, Experiencing Trust

"I've always maintained that what ecstasy really does to me, if I'm honest, is that it turns me back into a six year old. It's a childlike state; you don't have the worries, just like children; you put a group of children in a room and they just get on with it really, because they don't have the same inhibitions and everything is new and wonderful. It assails the senses. The inhibitions you can have about who you're talking to or what you're doing, just go. It's like free association. You feel really happy and empathetic; you connect to people, even though you might not be able to hold a conversation for more than two minutes. You can hug and kiss people without them thinking you're coming on to them. When I'm in a club on E I'm looking for a pure pleasure experience, it's just pleasure, nothing else. When I'm happiest is when I'm really chatty and I have loads of energy and I can exploit the whole club thing as much as possible. That whole state arises from the feeling that there is nothing wrong, everything's OK; it doesn't have to be everything's completely blissful, just that it's hunky dory. I'm loving the people I'm with and I have the ability to express that, to say 'I love you, give me a hug.' On one level, I've always recognised that there can be a superficiality on E but, saying that, I always managed not to do that, in terms of not doing it to people who I wouldn't normally do it to. So it's not falseness, just a sense of release; you feel happy about saying these things and connecting with your friends and you let them know how much they mean to you and you know they'll be receptive to it. Then there are the people you've seen, but you don't know well, but you feel you'd like to know them better and have an opportunity to and it's safe to do that because you have an excuse. It's almost expected." (Female 32; 9 years experience.)

This description captures the experience ecstasy helps generate within the social space of the club and many of my informants gave similar accounts of their own ecstasy experiences.

The most important consequence of taking ecstasy, for my informants, was the way it altered their experience of, and interaction with, people and I began to look for an explanation which could account for these effects. I discovered two explanatory frameworks from two different disciplines that, when combined, accounted for a large part of the ecstasy experience. The first was derived from the work of Antonio Damasio, whose investigations into the human brain have stressed the importance of emotion in structuring human consciousness. One particular example stood out in relation to this study. The example of S who had a disease known as Urbach-Wiethe, which cause calcium to be deposited in the amygdala, this is how Damasio describes the effect that this calcification had on his patient:

“S approached people and situations with a predominantly positive attitude. Others would actually say that her approach was excessively and inappropriately forthcoming. S was not only pleasant and cheerful, she seemed eager to interact with most anyone....shortly after an introduction S would not shy away from hugging and touching...it was as if negative emotions such as fear and anger had been removed from her affective vocabulary, allowing the positive emotions to dominate her life, at least by greater frequency of occurrence if not by greater intensity....(*this behaviour was*) mostly caused by the impairment of one emotion: fear.” (Damasio 1999:64-65)

The similarities between this description and the behaviour of somebody on ecstasy, especially a novice, is astounding and strongly hints that ecstasy effects the amygdala or some other part of the brain's fear system in some way. S lived a life without fear and that occasionally made her vulnerable to manipulation by others; her judgement of other people's motives was impaired as Damasio explains:

“Immersed in a secure Pollyanna world, these individuals cannot protect themselves against simple and not-so-simple social risks and are thus more vulnerable and less independent than we are.” (ibid.:67)

However, unlike S, ecstasy users do not experience this state of reduced fear constantly; they know people can be untrustworthy and manipulative; they have experienced it and so the ecstasy rush is mediated by this autobiographical knowledge. However, experiencing even a temporary and partial dip in the feelings of fear and anxiety, which suffuse much of our social experiences, can bring its own rewards. It allows users to experience the sense of “happiness”, “empathy” and “*connection*” which this and other informants reported. Ecstasy allows them to experience a socio-sensual state in which fear is minimised. Fear is a curious emotion because often what we fear is the un-known, which in turn keeps the un-known unknowable. Take away the fear and you reduce the emotional distance between yourself and that which is unknown. It becomes approachable. If you approach an object, an experience

or a person without fear you approach them from within an entirely altered sensual state, your body looks relaxed, you do not exude threat, you smile and by making your approach in such a way you instantly reduce the chance of experiencing negative feedback, because you're not perceived as intimidating or threatening. It is a technique of the body which has profound social effects.

However, part of this reduction in fear arises from the assumptions people make about the environments in which ecstasy is taken. Ecstasy does not remove fear completely it just reduces it and this reduction has been woven into the social model of ecstasy use, which in itself helps to further reduce people's sense of fear. So the drug and the social model support one another and intensify one another. They turn this reduction in fear into a shared social event. I must stress that no clubber talked about the term fear, but like Damasio's assessment of patient S, they stressed the positive emotions they both felt and shared during their ecstasy experiences, which Damasio was able to relate back to S's lack of fear. In terms of the ecstasy orientated club experience, this lack of fear manifests itself as a sense of "basic trust". This is a term taken from child psychology, where it is used to describe the bond between carer and child. If a child never reaches a point of basic trust with its carers then that child will have on-going social problems, because it will be unable to form stable relationships. However, I want to extend this notion of basic trust and use it as framework for examining the relationships between adults and their social world. It is my contention that when people leave home, and head out into the world, they must create their own relationships of basic trust, within that world, which will mark out the relationships that provide the bedrock of their own social experience of the world. More contentiously I would suggest that ecstasy can allow people to experience temporary feelings of basic trust with others, even if they never achieved it with their parents. However, if these experiences cannot be extended out into the everyday world, within a shared social framework, then they will swiftly be discounted by punters as false and illusionary. I must stress this isn't the reason people take ecstasy; they are not looking to reduce their sense of fear; they don't even consider themselves as afraid; they are not seeking out a sense of basic trust; they just want a good time. The reduction in fear and the sense of basic trust that accompanies it is just the primary emotional states from which a party arises. The "set and setting" of the party must maximise the potential of these emotional states and turn them into a shared social experience, that goes well beyond feeling a reduced sense of fear and a heightened sense of trust.

The knowledge that she was in an ecstasy environment allowed my informant, from the beginning of this section, to make certain presumptions about the crowd's behaviour. She could assume that they will be approachable and friendly. She also mentions the "superficial" nature of the drug. There are two forms of social interaction taking place on ecstasy in the club space. The first was the way people interacted with the friends they arrived with, this was not seen as 'superficial' because it was part of an on-going social network that existed outside of the club space. The second was the way people interacted with strangers, while in the club, this was seen as an important part of the "pure pleasure experience" my informant was seeking. My informant makes it clear that there are limits to these stranger interactions and that she wouldn't want to treat a stranger in a club in the same way as she treated her close friends. She wanted to be chatty and friendly to strangers; she wanted to enjoy strangers, but she didn't want to be "false", by saying inappropriate things to them, that meant she was treating them like long term friends. I would again relate this split between friends and strangers and the potential sense of superficiality, my informant identifies, to my hypothesis that a diminishment in fear is the key to understanding the ecstasy experience. Over time people begin to recognise that the social encounters they have on ecstasy are marked out by the level of immediate closeness they feel towards someone; they have learnt that this is part of the drug's effects upon them, but unlike Damasio's patient S, they have autobiographical memories which alert them to the fact that this is a special state of relations between people. They retain a critical function in relation to their own behaviour and they realise that the way people behave on ecstasy may be very different from the way they behave when they are not on it. So they channel the most intense effects of the drugs into their own social groups and simply enjoy chatting and laughing with strangers for the sheer fun of it, without expecting anything to necessarily come of these social encounters. They are enjoying the moments for what they are. As another informant explained:

"Meeting people in clubs is a very immediate thing; it's fun; I've told strangers they were beautiful, because at that time I thought they were and it's just like paying them a compliment and I don't really expect anything in return; I'm not making any big statement; I'm not trying to make them into my friends; I'm just being complimentary because that's how I feel and often that's how people look. I've never told a stranger that I love them and they were my best friend in a club; I wouldn't like to do that; it would be bullshit, because it takes time to get to know a friend, so I think club crowds are less utterly loved up, more just gentle and excited and complimentary towards one another, whereas with close friends the experience is a lot

deeper and I've enjoyed both sides of that." (Female 29; 12 years experience.)

The urban environment is extreme in itself; it acts as a pressure cooker that intensifies experience; you negotiate it with your guard up. In many ways ecstasy is the direct antidote to the sense of underlying anxiety that infects urban life. It allows you to experience the crowds, that make up a huge part of the urban experience, in a very different way. Certainly part of this encounter arises from the social rules that surround much of clubbing, but ecstasy allows you to fully experience those rules as an embodied force, because those rules were created from within the ecstasy rush. Once you have experienced this embodied state, once you've learnt what those social rules feel like, you can go on to re-create those experiences to some extent without the drug, because you know how far you can go in a club and how to interact with people while in the space. Which is why I was constantly being mistaken for an E'd up party animal when I'd only had a couple of beers. Once you've become confident in clubs, once you can just let your hair down and go for it, then you look like you're on E. You have created an embodied, emotive model which underpins the reality of the rules of clubbing.

The other major effect of E is the raw energy aspect, which can in itself change your experience of the space and give you the euphoria reported by ecstasy users, but E is very different from speed or coke, which seem to work by increasing your defences and strengthening your guard until you feel indestructible, which is a somewhat different experience. They don't imbue you with the sense of trust, that is part of the E gig, although if you're familiar with the ecstasy experience you can transfer some of its emotional and embodied aspects into these alternate drug experiences, because they exist as an embodied memory, a way of feeling the club space and experiencing the social interactions that you have there. I must reiterate that I'm not talking about people feeling scared and then taking E to relieve that fear, that is not what happens. Rather by taking ecstasy people release themselves from the body by which they hold the anxieties of city living at bay. They resist this anxiety by creating a resistant body, that allows them to negotiate the social reality of the metropolis without it becoming experienced in mind as the idea of fear. It is held in the body, it is a particular musculature, a set of emotional parameters, a sub-conscious physicality, that arises from the anonymity of our social encounters, that take place in the stranger led world of the city. It is most evident on the tube: silence, no eye contact, a studied invisibility within the mass of commuters, very few people smiling, all the things that are altered in a club crowd. This is not fear as an overwhelming force; it is fear as a

general level of anxiety about other people's possible intentions and actions. As Joseph LeDoux explains in *"The Emotional Brain"*:

"Bigger brains allow better plans, but for these you pay in the currency of anxiety." (LeDoux 1998:177)

Energy

"For me a lot of the drug thing is about energy when I've done a full week at work and I'm going out then I need the extra energy. If I'm going to have an awesome night, rather than an OK night, I'll honk a gram of whiz or pop a pill and suddenly the night's alive and I can concentrate on the whole party thing, without having to feel tired and half thinking I want to go to bed." (Male 26; 8 years experience.)

This informant stresses the energising quality of his drugs of choice, the way in which they can banish tiredness for hours at a time. This is important for a number of reasons. Firstly, because the sensation of that energy rushing through your body immediately intensifies your experience of the event; it imbues you with a radical physicality that can, in itself, feel liberating. Secondly, it allows you to seize your leisure time with both hands. Leisure is time for the self; clubbers want it to be far more intense than the time that they give to their working lives; they want to be on form, not exhausted and drained by their jobs. They want their own time to feel different from the time which they give to other more controlled aspects of their lives. This informant didn't hate his job, he thoroughly enjoyed it, going so far as to describe himself as a "workaholic", but he still needed to experience this sense of changing gear, that made his time more sensually intense than the time he gave to earning the money he needed to support himself. This desire has expanded leisure time; the chronology of the night has been altered and the boundaries surrounding the world of leisure have shifted. The licensing laws have been changed as a direct result of the rave movement. Many clubs are open all night and drugs allow people to savour this change by keeping them awake and empowering their nocturnal reveries. However, as the same informant suggested this can also have negative effects:

"I think a lot of the downside to taking drugs arises from sleep deprivation after all it's a recognised form of torture isn't it?" (Male 26; 8 years experience.)

The downside is sleep deprivation and exhaustion, but people are prepared to put up with these, at least for a while, because they get to experience their own lives accelerated to a point of passionate intensity, that feels very different from the ordered mundanity of the

daylight hours. You can't "live it large" if you feel like the dormouse in Lewis Carroll's *"Alice in Wonderland"*, constantly wanting to snuggle down for a snooze. The effects of exhaustion are accumulative, though the balance can shift to the point where the world of work can become almost dreamlike, you feel disconnected from it, its niggles and pressures are intensified by tiredness, it can become harder to deal with. This is one of the main reasons clubbers leave clubbing or begin to slow down and alter their nocturnal patterns. They re-address the balance, their clubbing becomes more occasional, they give themselves more time to recharge their batteries without having to abandon clubbing completely.

Touch, Sex and Socialising

"One the best E hits I had was at a party when my friends X and Y were in a particular friendly mood. I was dressed up, feeling great and being very tactile, dancing around, being gentle and a bit lascivious in the club, but then we went back to mine with a gang and X and Y and I went to bed together and we were being deliciously feely with each other and I love that. Ecstasy's a sensual drug rather than a lust drug; you get to touch people for the pleasure of touching them, of feeling their skin and making them feel good, but you're not striving for a fuck; it's more playful and less desperate than that. For me the post clubbing thing is also the clubbing thing. This flats really well set up for after-parties. One of my mates monopolises the bath and people just get in and out of it with him. Everyone's E'd up. People talk; they do the music bit and it's about coming out at the other end of the experience closer to the people who you've shared it with and I think, especially with the 'all back to mine thing', that's really important. You go out with a group; you pick some more people up along the way; then it's back to someone's flat and you've got absolute licence to tell them everything that's on your mind; you can be open with them; it's really passionate and really relaxed at the same time." (Male 32; 14 years experience.)

My informant's statement captures the tactile quality of the ecstasy rush; touch becomes electric and deeply satisfying and the ecstasy rush itself is an incredibly sensual experience. As you come up on ecstasy you feel your body changing, once this rush has levelled out your sensual self is altered and my informant points out how this sensual shift changes the way in which you interact with people on a sensual level. This is an important difference between socialising on ecstasy and socialising in the everyday world. In the preface to *"Touching: The Human Significance of the Skin"*, Ashley Montagu suggests that:

"The impersonality of life in the Western world has become such that we have produced a race of untouchables. We have become strangers to each other, not only avoiding but even warding off all forms of "unnecessary"

physical contact, faceless figures in a crowded landscape, lonely and afraid of intimacy....The world of Western man has come to rely heavily for communication on the “distance senses,” sight and hearing, and of the “proximity senses,” taste, smell, and touch, has largely tabooed the latter.” (Montagu 1986: xiv)

This tactile rush arises from two sources: firstly the actuality of touching other people, putting your arm around them, giving them a hug and dancing with them, is all part of the ecstasy experience and secondly from the sensual intensity of the club space itself, the crush of bodies, the heat, the sexual buzz, all impacts upon the body of the clubber with such force that it feels like being touched even when you’re not actually being touched. This is a somewhat synaesthetic experience, hard to capture in words but nevertheless real. It’s as if the sensual weight of the club crowd and club space rests upon the skin. People on ecstasy do touch each other more than people using other intoxicants; touch becomes informal and gentle; it is used as a way of communicating between people on ecstasy; it becomes playful and, as Montagu suggests, this is a rare experience in the contemporary world. My informant then suggests that when this tactile and sensual shift becomes part of sex then it changes the nature of that sex. It becomes less “desperate” more “playful” and “deliciously feely”; a subject I will discuss in more detail in the chapter on sex.

This informant also gives us our first glimpse of the “all back to mine” element of clubbing. This is less like the “afterglow”, that Malbon (1999) mentions, and more of a direct continuation of the party, but in an altered style, it’s more about face to face encounters. In social terms these sessions can be intense, as the distractions of the club space are left behind. They are also playful: people gab, talk bullshit, laugh, get off with one another, take more drugs and as one informant suggested:

“The post party get together is important; it’s often where the deepest friendships are formed or consolidated; you get to know more about people and, well, bond with them I suppose, but on a deeper level than in a club because it’s easier to talk. They can be horny too, especially when people are all loved-up and you get to snog or massage each other and fool around. I like that it’s really easy and laid back, much less manic than when you’re in an actual club. It’s like two different experiences that go really well together.” (Female 32; 9 years experience.)

Another informant said:

“I don’t really get off on doing ecstasy in clubs anymore; I prefer to do it with a few mates round at someone’s house, like you do at an after party; I get more out of doing it like that now than hanging around amongst a load of gurning strangers; it makes more sense to me.” (Male 33, 17 years experience.)

As many clubs become less ecstasy orientated many people either abandon the drug completely or create new situations in which to utilise its effects. These tend to be more intimate, smaller gatherings where they can just enjoy their drugs free from the watchful eyes of security. They get to wallow in the drug rush and do what they please amongst people they know and trust. These type of experiences have always been around; I had my first ecstasy at one such event and it was gorgeous, a gentle, silly, lascivious blast, but these experiences were often over shadowed by the extremes of the club space which captured everyone's attention. They never went away however and people are returning to them partly because they challenge the anonymity of the club space and make the experience more about friends and less about strangers.

Accelerants

The major club drugs all share a social edge, a feeling of being hurled head-first into the world. In the case of the accelerants, particularly amphetamine and cocaine, this feeling arises from the sensation of energy they unleash in the body that is in itself empowering. Cocaine was first legally marketed as a wonder drug and adverts proudly proclaimed that it was the perfect cure for:

“young persons afflicted with timidity in society” (Quoted in Grinspoon & Bakalar 1976:93)

This is one reason for cocaine's popularity it immunises you against self consciousness and doubt and lets you come out from behind your mummy's apron, by imbuing you with a sense of strength and certainty. As Sigmund Freud once proclaimed in a letter to his fiancée Martha Bernays:

“You shall see who is stronger, a gentle little girl who doesn't eat enough or a great wild man who has cocaine in his body.” (Ibid. 1976:33)

This quote captures the visceral bodily rush of cocaine that underpins the states of mind which users report. Amphetamine achieves a very similar goal at a fraction of the cost. Yet there are some subtle differences not least the social models that surround their usage. Cocaine has become the drug of success; its price alone, which ranges from £40-£60 a gram, ensured its association with wealth and prestige and made it so popular with celebrities. This is important because fame and celebrity themselves are becoming significant aspirational models in our contemporary social world and, rightly or wrongly, cocaine is

perceived as being part of that model, because its price makes it the drug of success. I would argue that cocaine, because of its physical effects and the social model that surround its use, provides an embodied experience of energised visibility and individuality that makes living the high life easier, by making you feel like you would imagine a celebrity would feel: confident, visible, secure. An informant suggested that:

“Cocaine’s always really popular when people have got too much money and too much to prove. It’s a lifestyle thing, a confidence thing really, a way of sharpening your ego and facing the world, powdered popularity if you like.” (Male 34; 16 years experience.)

It is this aspect of the cocaine rush that leads people to label it “a bullshitter’s crutch”, even amongst people who enjoy cocaine. It is the drug of “front”, that allows people to present a particular version of themselves to the world. However, not every cocaine user subscribes to this social model; some take the drug simply because they enjoy its effects even though they have no pretensions of fame and fortune; it’s a treat, something to be savoured and shared with friends. (These social models are largely inverted when powdered cocaine becomes “crack” cocaine, which is associated with self destructive and violent behaviour, that puts it closer to heroin in terms of how it is viewed by the wider world and many clubbers themselves. None of my informants mentioned using “crack” so I have no data on it in relation to the club scene I have been examining.)

Amphetamine on the other hand is seen as a “street drug”, cheap, effective, but somewhat unglamorous, the working class version of cocaine, that costs £10 a gram. The basic currency of the accelerants is raw energy and the feeling of this energy surging through the system alters the accelerant user’s relationship to the world. Externally the world remains much the same, but from an internal psycho-physical perspective it becomes charged with a potential for engagement. Speech becomes strident, ideas explode into the mind and you feel like you can communicate at warp speed. This is an emotionally intense language somewhat evangelistic in its passion by being grounded in a sense of certainty that can, on occasion, seem almost aggressive. Bodies become empowered and revitalised; their rhythmic structure quickens and they develop that restless coke and speed physicality: constantly playing with their noses, eyes darting around the space, scanning the room to see where the action is, a positive tension between self and world. It’s exhilarating, you feel turbo charged and fuel injected, the human equivalent of a Formula 1 car.

On the down side accelerant users can seem boorish and rigid, although you feel ideas with an heightened fervour they can lose their fluidity and become repetitive. Not to the person

who's on the drug of course, but to those who are listening to them. If you over do the accelerants the sense of tension between self and world can become overwhelming. You can become so visible in the world that you begin to believe that everyone must be looking at you and talking about you. The hyper-vanity of acceleration and expansion makes you feel like the centre of the universe, around which the space is revolving, which is groovy when you're having a great time, feeling witty and wonderful, but not so hot when you gone that step too far and are beginning to feel tense or out of control. Then you need to be able to relax. As Alastair Crowley points out:

"With cocaine one is indeed master of everything but everything matters intensely."

This sense of self importance means that everything relates intensely to the self, it all matters, because you are the central referent, but this feeling comes in short lived bursts. As one informant explained:

"Cocaine makes you feel really energetic and big, but I think you're constantly having to fight a comedown, because the rush only last 45minutes. You don't really notice it if you've got enough to keep going, but if you only have a line or two, and that's all you've got, then I find that it can leave you tireder than you would be if you hadn't taken it. I mean ecstasy last 5, 6 hours; you can do a lot in that time, but to get the same effect on coke you've got to snort a fair few lines to keep going." (Female)

One possible explanation for this sense of mastery and confidence is offered in the book "*Cocaine*", which suggests that:

"The heightening of the sense of self- "The greatest ego-inflating drug there is"-may be a correlate in the mind of the sympathomimetic action of stimulants. For in moments of stress and danger the organism....must *realize* its own distinctness from the world and discourage any tendency toward a relaxed merging with it. In the mind this may produce a strong sense of individuality and of power and control." (Grinspoon & Bakalar 1976:95)

So cocaine may imbue the user with a similar sensation as that experienced when they are in a fight or flight situation, but because there is no initiatory target, nothing to fight or run away from, then they get to put those sensations to a different use. Instead of reducing fear, which is what I suggested was part of the ecstasy experience, cocaine actually mimics how people feel in response to a fear generating stimulus, but because there is no actual stimulus people just get the sense of being empowered and ready for action. However, over indulgence can produce intense paranoia and agitation and this arises from putting yourself in that fight or flight mode. Some part of your brain is primed for the stimulus that would have normally initiated this physical and emotional state. If you're having fun with your

mates and everything's OK then this aspect of the drug will remain dormant. However, if the situation changes, or you take too much of the drug to be able to keep its effects under control, then you can begin to interpret people's actions negatively because of your own altered emotional state. An informant gave me an interesting description of this process:

"I've only really got the heebie-jeebies on drugs a couple of times and you learn how to deal with them after a while, because you know it's just the drugs, but when it first happens it's fucking weird. I was at this club having a really good time, having a few lines and then, shit I can't even really remember what set me off, some misunderstanding or other and I start feeling paranoid and I'm looking at people and I think that they're talking about me or looking at me funny and I saw people sort of talking into each other's ears, like they were whispering, which is ridiculous because they must have been shouting over the music to be heard, but I thought they were whispering about me and then when they laughed I thought they were laughing at me and I started to feel really tense and I wanted to leave and suddenly the whole club looked completely different everyone looked intimidating. Then one of my mates came back and I told her how I felt and she just smiled at me and told me to chill out, because it was just the coke and that made me feel a bit better and I had another beer and just sat and talked to my mate and after half an hour or something I felt fine and the club looked all right again, everyone looked normal and I relaxed, but I laid off the coke for the rest of the night." (Male 27; 8 years experience.)

This is an interesting quote because it reveals the way my informant's emotional state affected his perception of the social environment he was in. He began explaining people's actions through that emotional state, creating explanatory narratives that related to his own sense of threat and tension.

As coke users are already so hyped up this negative reaction can get nasty real quick if there is nothing to calm things down. The presence of cocaine ups the ante and overindulgence can put people on a hair trigger, that can have some fairly ugly ramifications. This isn't a inevitable outcome of using cocaine; it arises from people abandoning their control over its use or taking it in the wrong "set and setting".

Psychedelics

The full blown psychedelics like L.S.D, psilocybin and ketamine have the ability to radically warp the world, but the dosages that are used in the club space are far smaller than the average hit taken back in the 1960s, which has meant that they can be used more successfully in intense social situations. However, there are a number of differences between the psychedelics and the other club drugs. Whereas ecstasy seems to imbue most

users with a predilection for seeing things positively, you have to create that positive element with L.S.D, mushrooms and ketamine, which is why Leary stressed set and setting so strongly. This explains why ecstasy took off amongst more people than L.S.D; in many ways it's an easier drug to handle and make sense of.

There is no convincing framework for the psychedelic experience in the West. When people have tried to make sense of psychedelics they have turned to Eastern mysticism and new age philosophies in an attempt to create such a framework. So if you're a hard-headed rationalist, with no spiritual beliefs, then these frameworks can look fairly lame. Ecstasy's effects on the other hand were quickly socialised by becoming part of the club space, so there was no need to create any other explanatory framework for the experience beyond having a good time with people. I believe this changed people's perspective upon L.S.D, they ceased to view it as a quasi-spiritual experience and just started to take it for fun.

Clubbing changes the way you experience psychedelics because getting amongst the crowd externalises their effects and stops them from becoming a predominantly internal journey. As one informant said:

"I have no time for pixies, gods, earth mothers and spiritual enlightenment, but I do have time for people and I find that tripping with them is just a really good way to experience them. It's funny and freaky; it's like sharing a holiday with someone; it brings you together in the same way." (Male)

The holiday analogy is interesting as psychedelics have the ability to make you feel like you've been elsewhere, that's why taking L.S.D is often referred to as tripping. Just like a holiday abroad you get to share a radically different world than you normally occupy. It's "wilder", "freakier" and more intense than your everyday experience of the world. L.S.D doesn't always induce hallucinations, particularly at current dosages, but it can still radically alter your emotional and sensual experience of the world and completely change the way you interpret that world. Colour in particular becomes incredibly intense; in fact the world just seems more sumptuous, vibrant and lucid all round. The faces in the crowd change, sometimes to the point where everybody looks utterly bizarre, which can be disconcerting but also exciting. Dancing on L.S.D is incredible; it provides an even more radically altered experience of your sensual self than ecstasy. Your body bristles with energy; it becomes lithe and empowered and each of your senses is intensified. The following informant said:

"Acid's my favourite drug. It's incredible, indescribable really, I love it. Dancing on it is wonderful; it's like being possessed, though it can make being in clubs quite difficult sometimes; it can all get a bit too odd and it can make talking to people hard. Having sex on it now that's utterly outrageous; it's completely changed the way I think of sex; I never realised that it could

be so intense, so ahhhhh; you can't really put it into words, but having sex with someone you love, whilst on L.S.D, is a slice of heaven on earth and it's become an important part of my relationship with my boyfriend. Just setting a week-end aside where we shut ourselves in our bedroom and have sex for hours, on a fairly hefty dose of acid, is an incredible way to experience each other." (Female 41; 19 years experience.)

This informant was focusing on the sensual aspects of the L.S.D experience, rather than its hallucinogenic and predominantly visual side. This sensual element can be utilised for dancing or, as this informant points out, sexually, but in either case it radically intensifies the sensual dynamic of the experience. It is also interesting to note that this informant, by using L.S.D with her boyfriend, or while clubbing, had created a socio-sensual framework which makes sense of L.S.D, rather than attempting to interpret the drugs effects in spiritual or psychological terms, which was the perspective stressed in the 1960s.

Psilocybin is not a common club drug; it is similar to L.S.D but from personal experience I would suggest that it is more consistently hallucinogenic and provides less energy than L.S.D. Psilocybin has always left me feeling like a pixie.

Ketamine is used in clubs and it is certainly a psychedelic. I've never used it myself but from my informants' descriptions I got the impression that a great deal of its psychedelic effect arose from the sense of disembodiment which Ketamine's anaesthetic qualities generated. It seemed comparable to descriptions of entering a sensory deprivation tank when the body's presence is diminished in mind. Ketamine seemed to produce the most internal and un-social experience of all the club drugs so informants described it as "a mind drug", which made them feel "disconnected" and some suggested that they had undergone "out of body experiences", where they felt like they were "floating over the dancefloor." Some people valued these effects, others found their inability to communicate while under its influence made it too introverted for use in the club space.

Marijuana

"Out here on the perimeter we are stoned immaculate." (Jim Morrison)

Many clubbers smoke dope and it's often used in conjunction with the other drugs to relax the rush that those drugs create, particularly when clubbers are "coming-down" and want something to smooth this transition out. However, it can be hard to smoke dope in clubs because it's so easy to smell. As one informant pointed out:

“It’s ridiculous the law on dope. It makes it really hard to smoke in clubs because you can smell it a mile off. Some places are all right about it but others aren’t. You can end up in the situation, where you’re in a room full of people, who are all on drugs, but because you like the smelly one you end up getting hassled, even though it’s nowhere near as strong as the other drugs. I’d love to just be able to go out have a couple of joints, a beer and a dance. That would be great, but it’s easier to stick to class As, because they’re less hassle in terms of getting them in and taking them.” (Female 29; 11 years experience.)

The difficulty in smoking dope in public spaces means that drinking or the dance drugs are the only real option if you want to go out. Dope smokers tend to do most of their smoking in their homes or round at friends; it’s not such a publicly social scene, although there are some clubs where you can get away with having a spliff as long as you’re discreet about it.

Marijuana is predominantly a giggly drug, far more so than alcohol, in that I have seen people convulsed with laughter and completely unable to control their laughter, while stoned, in a way I haven’t witnessed while drinking. Dope doesn’t provide the energy offered by the other club drugs, which is why people often use it in combination with other drugs while in the club space. With the arrival of “skunkweed”, which is hydroponically grown weed with a heightened tetrahydrocannabinol content, the marijuana rush was intensified. This was not always a positive experience for users; they could become lethargic or paranoid on skunkweed and one informant suggested that:

“Skunk’s like the Tennants Super of the dope world, fine if you want to be a stoner zombie, but it’s got not subtlety or style.” (Male)

Smoking dope has a number of effects; it relaxes the body and gives people a certain emotional distance between themselves and the world. Drawing from my own experiences this distance translates into a particular perspective upon the world. The easiest way to describe it is that the inherent absurdity of life is made manifest and its appearance is funny. Life is absurd Ha Ha Ha.

It also grants your mind a peculiar fluidity until, that is, you cease to be able to communicate or move because you’re so stoned. This fluidity arises from the same sense of emotional detachment, which allows you to view the contents of your own mind from within an altered and more relaxed bodily state. This experience is difficult to describe to the non dope smoker; you make odd connections between ideas and create strange juxtapositions and they’re funny. Once while hanging out with a performer friend of mine he announced that he’d had his first hash coffee, before turning up at our place. This performer had always had a problem with improvising monologues, but as the hash took effect he was able to just talk

and create stories of the top off his head. He amazed himself he had never been so linguistically dextrous in his entire life and this ability is further revealed in a lot of hip-hop lyrics with their frequent references to rhyming while smoking weed.

However, simple tasks can become very difficult; your short term memory is impaired; it can be hard to motivate yourself; you get confused easily. Yet these effects are not always unpleasant, as the actor Steve McQueen suggested when asked about his own prodigious use of weed while on set:

“I like to push it as far as it will go. It keeps me on the edge. It’s sort of a challenge. That feeling that I almost can’t make it and then I do. Know what I mean? I think it helps my concentration.” (From “*Esquire*”: The Esquire Profile: Volume 10 No 12 Author William Claxton.)

Weed has the ability to make simple and mundane tasks feel adventurous and challenging. Negotiating the world while stoned means negotiating the world from within an altered psycho-physical perspective. You see it and feel it differently and this creates an embodied tension, a sense of alterity, which is predominantly funny but which can, on occasion, tip over into confusion, paranoia and frustration. Simple things take longer to do; decisions become difficult to make. Mostly though, the gentle sensuality of dope suffuses your relationship to the world and allows you to manipulate that relationship at a sensual level. This is a property of all drugs; they simply allow you to engage with the world from within an altered point of sensual attachment to that world. They throw you into the world; they pull you back from the world; they change the way you encounter the objects of that world. They make the world a sensually intense place to be.

Heroin

Heroin isn’t a club drug in that people don’t take it in clubs and the vast majority of clubbers are not interested in it. However, more are trying it and the shift from injecting heroin to smoking heroin makes trying it more appealing, because it isn’t so closely associated to people’s idea of a heroin addict. This is a dangerous development because it simply takes longer to become addicted to heroin by smoking it. As one ex-heroin user explained;

“You’ll start feeling a habit coming on quicker if you’re injecting the stuff, maybe a fortnight of daily use, but if you’re smoking it then it can take a month or so to pick up your habit. Heroin’s not instantly addictive it takes time and that lures people into a false sense of security, as the adverts used to say, they “Think you can handle it”. Heroin’s a bitch; it takes all your

pain away mental, physical, everything. When you see someone on it they look so fucking dull, just stuck in a chair, looking pathetic; I've looked like that but it's a serene experience no worries, nothing; it drains you of your emotions and you don't give a fuck about anyone or anything except smack." (Male)

The effects of heroin are not conducive to creating the sort of experiences clubbers are looking for from drugs; they want to be social; they want to have a laugh; they don't want to end up slumped in a chair not communicating utterly detached from the world. I've tried heroin and I think it's a dreary drug, but then I don't want to become my furniture; I want to be part of the world, so it offered me nothing I valued. So the fact that a recent survey, by the clubbing magazine "*MixMag*", that suggested that 1 in 6 clubbers had tried heroin didn't necessarily mean they enjoyed it or would continue using it, because it's the antithesis of the social buzz that most clubbers want. One informant put her contempt for heroin in these terms:

"Smack will always be a drug for losers; the only clubber I've ever known who got into it was complete fuck up, one of those dicks that couldn't club unless he swallowed an entire chemist. Yeah I've been at the point when I was younger and more insecure when I didn't feel comfortable in a club until I was completely mashed, but most people grow out of it; I did, all my friends did. Some people just never get clubbing they think it's about the drugs when it's about the people and the tunes and having a time. The drugs are tools you learn to take them, but smacks not like the rest of them; you can't party on it; it's a drug for sad broken bastards or spoilt whining brats." (Female 29; 11 years experience.)

The Rhythms of Drug Use

In this section I want to explore the actualities of drug use from users' perspectives. Many of my informants were in their late 20s, 30s and 40s and the vast majority had been taking drugs for a number of years, most still took them although they no longer "caned" them, some were still in the every week-end stage, others had given up Class As completely, but still enjoyed a drink and a spliff. A series of relationships with drugs emerged from these interviews which can be seen as four stages of drug use. They are best summed up as:

- Discovery
- Honeymoon
- Excess
- Reassessment

The list above is not a natural progression, one stage does not necessarily lead to the other: they are simply categories that represent people's relationships to drugs and reveal how those relationships can change over time. Drug experiences like every other experience alters as people change; they are intimately linked to what's going on in people's lives when they are not on drugs; they occur within people's worlds and people bring their dreams, aspirations, desires and material circumstances into their drug use. The club drugs are also deeply social and people's perspectives upon that social world also have a huge effect on the way they experience drugs. If that club sociality doesn't blossom, if it remains disconnected to people's worlds when they're away from the club, then the intoxicant/club combination can become frustrating, shallow and false. If, on the other hand, these intoxicants become so much part of that everyday world, that people are only ever communicating with one another when out of it, then this too can cause problems. I want to now examine the categories laid out above.

Discovery

Learning how to take drugs is not a sinister process; none of my informants had been sold drugs in the playground or tempted into drug taking by "evil" strangers; they'd discovered drugs with their friends. All my informants had taken some form of drug before they ever entered the club space and they had started taking drugs for a number of reasons. The main one was curiosity; they were part of a world in which drugs existed and they wanted to try them out. They had seen people enjoying drugs, some of their friends took drugs and, contrary to the rhetoric that surrounds drugs in the everyday world, these friends were not screwed up, sad or desperate people; they were simply friends. There is an element of peer pressure operating here, of wanting to be part of the gang, but this pressure dissipates over time:

"My motive now is to have a good time; it's purely a hedonistic experience. Before I'd just want to do what my friends were doing; peer pressure if you like. When I was at college if you said no to going out you became a party pooper or whatever. I was also looking to meet guys, but when I was younger we were more insecure, a lot of the going out thing was about proving how good a time you were having to other people, rather than just having it for yourself." (Female 32; 9 years experience.)

As we can see this informant recognised that initial peer pressure, but also felt that it no longer played a role in her own intoxicatory experiences. She had got beyond being

pressurised and taken control of her own intoxication. She decided when, where and how she would become intoxicated, even though she was part of a group who regularly got intoxicated together. Drugs are something for the gang to do, a leisure option and, outside of cocaine and heroin, they're a relatively cheap leisure option.

The first intoxicant all my informants indulged in was alcohol; it was booze that showed them how much fun they could have when intoxicated. Once they'd discovered that simple fact they could begin to value the sociality of intoxication; the way it could change their relationship to the world and other people. From then on it was a case of coming across alternative intoxicants and witnessing people having different style of intoxicatory experience, which appeared very different from the times they were having on alcohol. As one informant explained:

"I started clubbing, in the sense of taking drugs and clubbing, in 1990. Before that I had been in clubs, in fact I remember going to The S Club. Everybody else was on drugs and I wasn't and everybody was out of their heads; I was looking at them thinking 'I don't get this really; why's everybody jumping up and down really enjoying this? I just don't get it'. Then later, as I said in 1990, I went in and a friend gave me some E and suddenly it was 'Oh now I get it, now I understand, I know why they're jumping up and down and smiling so much and having such a great time.' "

(Female 29; 10 years experience.)

This is an example of discovering the socio-sensual limits of alcohol; my informant was going to clubs and drinking, but she still didn't "get" the club space, which, in the early 1990s, would've been orientated around ecstasy. Drink could allow her to engage with the club experience to a certain degree, but she obviously didn't feel that her experience was as intense as the rest of the crowds who were, to her eyes, experiencing and expressing another feeling, another relationship to the club space, another level of abandonment and enthusiasm. Basically, they looked like they were having a better time than she was and it was only after taking ecstasy that she understood why they looked this way. They were indeed having a better time than her. This recognition is an important part of discovering drugs; when you come across people, who seem to be having a better time than you and who don't seem to be having any problems connected to their drug use, then you begin to reassess drugs before you even take them. As one informant explained:

"I'd smoked weed and hash, but I'd always been nervous about the other drugs. Then I went to Australia and met up with a group of people there. They were a great bunch, successful professional people who enjoyed taking ecstasy and acid; they were just so sensible and straightforward about it and they were having such a good time that I just decided to give them a go. So

I did and I had a really good time too and I've been taking them on and off since then." (Female 41; 19 years experience.)

Once people realise that alcohol isn't the only way to become intoxicated then their curiosity is wetted even further, but drugs exist within social networks and these networks have their own rules about what drugs they will or won't take. However, these rules change over time, new drugs are introduced and old ones abandoned as people's relationships to drugs change. The utterly simplistic idea that you have a joint one week and then end up taking heroin, because one drug somehow leads to another, is ridiculous. Drugs are part of socialising and the type of drugs that people come across is dictated by these social groups more than any craving to get more "out of it". People are introduced to drugs by friends.

The simplistic rhetoric of the legal and medical establishment that "drugs are bad" swiftly becomes irrelevant to people, who are thoroughly enjoying their times on drugs. By linking all drugs under one banner this rhetoric distorts the very real differences and potential problems of each drug. However, in this discovery stage any potential problems people will experience with drugs are a long way off. People are taking their drugs with their friends and having a great time with those friends. They are discovering new ways of enjoying themselves, new ways of being round one another, new sensual experiences and new ways of communicating. The impact this has on their social world, the way the intensity of taking drugs binds those worlds together and shifts them beyond a feeling of mundanity, is as important as the drugs themselves.

When the discovery of intoxicants coincides with the discovery of clubs then an extra level of intensity is added. Clubs house parties and parties have always been associated with intoxication. You won't find people queuing for hours to attend a T-Total party. Yet clubs are not the only space people use intoxicants. I met a number of people who never went to clubs, or no longer went to clubs, but who still took club intoxicants, like ecstasy and cocaine, they just did it in different social groupings and settings. So just as people drink both at home and in pubs and clubs, so people took drugs in a similar manner. Clubs offered a different dimension to the intoxicatory experience. They did not cause people to take drugs, all my informants had taken drugs outside of the club space before entering those spaces and they did not prolong peoples use of drugs, because people continued to take drugs once they'd left clubbing. They were simply spaces in which to share intoxication and intensify the experience of that intoxication no matter what the intoxicant was. Yet it is undeniable that clubs are good places to share intoxication with people; the intensity of the

environment itself matches the sensual intensity of the club intoxicants and allows people to savour and express that sensual rush to its fullest potential. As one informant explained:

“You don’t have to take drugs to enjoy clubs; I’ve had great times clubbing just drinking a few beers, but when you do take drugs then it adds to the experience because it makes it more intense.” (Male 33; 17 years experience.)

Honeymoon

“For a while, after my first trip, I really did think I’d discovered the meaning of life, even though I could only grasp it when I was in the middle of one.” (Male)

“That first year of pilling was such a fucking scream; I was having a big time; it was exciting; I didn’t think I’d ever stop doing them or that my life would ever be the same again.” (Female)

“Cocaine made me feel like supergirl; I was fearless; I felt like I’d always wanted to feel, confident, strong, in your face; it was great.” (Female)

The honeymoon period of intoxication is the period of maximum enthusiasm for the intoxicants themselves. It is best illustrated on a macro-scale by examining the large scale arrival of mass ecstasy use in Britain, which was greeted with an almost evangelical enthusiasm, mirroring the arrival of L.S.D in the 1960s. People believed that something special was happening, that the world was changing; the soulless greed of the 1980s was viewed with contempt; the Communist block crumbled through largely peaceful revolutions and ecstasy caught the zeitgeist of the times. Take this example of ecstasy evangelism from Matthew Collins’s *“Altered States”*:

“The estate where we come from, drinking’s the thing, get proper out of it and have a top chuckle with your pals.....We had a base in Wythenshawe where every activity in the world was going on from. One hundred young lads in there on beer, but all of a sudden five or ten of them had gone wayward, they’re coming in with fucking bandannas tied round their heads. From 1988 to the end of 1990 we didn’t touch a drop of alcohol, not one fucking drink. After Sweat it Out, for two years we went on a fucking mission from God, we were like Jehovah’s Witnesses going out promoting it. Telling our parents it’s going to change the world and all that.” (Collins 1998:153)

This was the ecstasy honeymoon and, as in the 1960s with L.S.D., the drug and rave combination offered an experience radically different from anything people had encountered before that it made them feel that change was imminent. However, the comedown from ecstasy's honeymoon period made people more aware of the limitations of all drugs, so the nature of the honeymoon changed. Now 14 years later it is extremely rare to hear people talking about E in such evangelical terms. The E experience has gained a future and a past; it has been contextualised and people talk about it more knowingly, with less fervour and more awareness of its downside. On a smaller scale though this honeymoon period can be encountered with most intoxicants at a more personal level and in less radical contexts. No one believes cocaine can change the world, far from it, but discovering cocaine can be exciting if you've never sampled it before. Newcomers to intoxicants can still find them passionate and radical, because those intoxicants offer such an alternate experience of people's own social worlds. People feel that something has been added to their lives, those lives have become more passionate and exciting. As one informant explained:

"I knew I was really living and life felt so electric; it was the best time and I don't think I'll ever have better times; I was with people I cared about and it was just an adventure, going out, taking the drugs, dancing, laughing, feeling really connected to one another; it felt perfect." (Female 34; 17 years experience.)

All my informants agreed that drugs were best experienced socially and that predominantly taking them alone, just like drinking on your own, was "a bit sad really". Drugs were valued for the social experiences they helped create and these social experiences were as important as the drugs themselves in underpinning this honeymoon period. You and your friends are out and about having a series of adventures that bind these friendship networks together at a deeply sensuous level.

The honeymoon period is also the period where the effects of taking drugs is having a limited impact on people's lives away from the club space. In the last instance the life outside of clubbing exerts a controlling influence on most people's intoxicatory practice. The more connected people are to that everyday life the more negatively they will begin to experience the effects of "caning" drugs and staying out all night, because it gets in the way of their everyday lives. People's priorities can change over time with age, for a while they focus all their energies into partying, but eventually they must find a balance between the parties and building a life outside of the party and this is when the honeymoon starts to come to an end.

Excess

“The road of excess to the palace of wisdom leads because how can you know what is enough until you have experienced more than enough.” (William Blake quoted in *Modern Primitives*: Vale&Juno 1991:204)

“We had a system: we’d start the night with a couple of lines of speed and then go out drinking, after that we’d take a pill and club it up; once the pill was starting to fade we’d drop a tab of acid, which would see us through till the next morning; then it was more speed and off to the pub on the Sunday for a booze up; by Sunday night we were all completely wasted no-one had slept we must have looked dreadful, but it was hardcore we were unstoppable party machines for a while there, but after a while we had to slow down; we were all completely mashed and it was getting out of control.” (Female 29; 12 years experience.)

“I took ecstasy virtually every week-end for 10 years until it got to the point where I wasn’t starting to feel OK afterwards until the following Friday. Then we’d go out and pill it for the week-end and the whole cycle would start again. It had to stop. I don’t regret it, but it had to stop.” (Female 34; 17 years experience.)

The above quote by William Blake gives us another perspective upon excess because he stresses the way people learn from their own excesses. People have very different ideas about what constitutes excess; it is more of an experience than an idea or a set of weights and measures; it is the recognition of your own personal limits, which is the element that Blake was alluding to. Those limits arise from the amount of drugs you take in any given night, the amount of nights you spend drugged up in total and the effect this has on other aspects of your life. One woman I spoke to thought her monthly pill had become too much for her to deal with; another found that her gram of cocaine and a few Es were the perfect combination for the week-ends and that spliffing, boozing and just the occasional mid-week toot of cocaine were fine during the week. When excess arises from a desire to go further, to live faster longer, because it’s such a laugh, then it actually seems to be easier to recognise the point when it’s got to stop, because it starts making the rest of your life more difficult to cope with. When excess arises from desperation, a need to stay up, because the world you re-enter and your experience of yourself in that world is just too unpalatable then to use the drug terminology:

“You’re fucked mate, utterly fucked. It’s like flying a plane, no point in taking off unless you’ve got a place to land.” (Male)

When I talk about excess I'm not talking about addiction. In fact many of my informants were fairly derisory about the whole notion of addiction when applied to certain drugs. As one explained:

"Smack's addictive, though you have to work bloody hard to become an addict it doesn't happen overnight that's just a myth. Fags are addictive. The rest of them, well addictions just an excuse; a way of wriggling out of taking control of them; it's just a bit of propaganda that means people don't have to admit that they were weak and stupid and fucked up royally. They can just blame the drugs, 'It's not my fault mister, honest, I'm a victim of the big bad drugs.' It's pathetic. You've got to keep an eye on how many drugs you're using and be honest about why you're using them or else you're in for a bloody great fall into a hole, that you dug yourself." (Male 28, 10 Years Experience)

Excess is more about doing too many drugs for too long and it usually arises from people having so much fun that they don't want to stop. Then everything catches up with them, not just the drugs, but the lost sleep, the thrashed bodies, the hang-overs and comedowns and their lives outside of the party become more and more difficult to negotiate. Addiction is a luxury of time derived from not having to fully negotiate the world, either because you're on its fringes and denied access or you're wealthy enough to insulate yourself from it. The generation of clubbers I've ended up meeting are in neither position; they have to and want to support themselves; they are part of the social system; they work; they have aspirations and so their drug taking occurs within that external everyday framework. Their intoxicatory experiences can alter what they want from that world, it can change their perspective upon the world, but they haven't completely disconnected themselves from the everyday world because that world is still a necessity for their survival.

So a sense of excess arises from a relationship between self and world; it is recognised through the body in how that world feels and is experienced. As one informant explained:

"I'd got to the point where work was just this thing I did to pay for clubbing; I was tired and ratty and everything started getting on top of me, after the partying the rest of my life felt flat and dull, but I was too knackered to do anything about it, to change anything; it made me question what I was doing and what I wanted from my life." (Female 29; 11 years experience.)

This is the bodily state of excess, clubbing's sensual doppelganger, the point at which clubbing makes the rest of your life more difficult to cope with. I must stress the almost mundane nature of these experiences of excess. They are not the high drama most often associated with intoxicatory excess. They are not a sudden rush to the hospital or a month cleaning toilets at the Betty Ford clinic. They don't usually involve joining AA. They are

simple negotiations between self and world; the realisation that, by focusing all your energies on clubbing, you are leaving yourself too little time to create anything else you can take pleasure in. The next informant places this lack of dramatic content into perspective:

“People fuck up on drugs because they have an addictive personality. People fuck up on drugs because they haven’t got anything else to do with their time. People fuck up on drugs because they’re stupid and they’ve got no discipline. Most of the reason people fuck up on drugs is that they’re only ever told that they’re dangerous and they shouldn’t do them. Then they find out that drugs are fun and they think ‘Oh why can’t I just cane them’. They have to find out the problems for themselves. The bugbear image, that you’re presented of drugs, is you will take this pill or snort this line and have a dodgy reaction and die that night or you’ll end up selling your ass in alleyways to pay for your crack habit. Whereas I think it’s astounding that no one really says that if you take too many drugs you will turn into a boring person and become insecure, which is the front line; the thing that most people will come up against and recognise first as something that is a warning signal. When you’re starting every fucking conversation with the phrase ‘I was so out of it’, because you think it makes you sound like an interesting and exciting person then that’s the first stage in becoming a drug bore.” (Male 28; 10 years experience.)

This is an interesting statement because it reveals the disparity between the medical and legal authorities view on drugs and the problems discovered by drug users themselves. The constant dramatic stress on death and addiction of lives utterly destroyed through drugs, within this rhetoric, actively obscures these other far more common and more mundane indicators of excess: when people get to the point where they can’t perceive of having a good time without being intoxicated; when being intoxicated is all they’ve got to talk about; when being intoxicated makes the rest of their lives difficult to negotiate, then they are approaching a state of excess. Yet they can experience all these things without ever becoming addicts who crave drugs every day and steal from their granny’s purse. It is the party lifestyle as a whole, which is linked to clubbing but also exists beyond clubs, rather than simply the drugs which can get too much to handle. The lost sleep and the hangovers, that leave people feeling drained and ill, create a bodily state of excess, which begins to exert an oppositional pull to the delights of getting intoxicated and partying. There is also a social element to this process as the next informant explained:

“What happened was we’d go out and do an E or half an E and either club it up or party at home, but when it was just E we didn’t do it all the time. Then a friend introduced our group to cocaine and then things began to change, because cocaine’s not as intense as E; it’s easier to cope with and that’s when things started to change, because for about 7 to 8 months every time we got together we’d take drugs, sometimes ecstasy sometimes cocaine sometimes speed. There were times that I deliberately planned to stay away

from drugs, by having a meal round at mine or something, but people would bring some coke or E and it was like, oh shit, I just wanted a nice quite evening and a nice meal not this madness. In the end we had to make a real effort to stay class A free, just so we could have a different time together, something more mellow and relaxed.” (Female 32; 9 years experience.)

This informant didn’t want to spend all her social time completely out of it; she wanted a range of experiences rather than just staying at a highly intense point of social intoxication. This group worked it out together, they agreed to change their social patterns. They still went out and went wild, but they also created other situations where they could meet up. Getting intoxicated to an extreme level had become a habit, rather than a choice. As the same informant explained:

“There was a time when I didn’t have the slightest qualm about it all; I really enjoyed it and I had no worries about it and then that feeling started to change last year. One of my friends was constantly giving me a hard time about it saying, ‘I don’t want to go out with you because all you do is this, all you talk about is that’ and being quite critical. I was having big weekends and ending up shagged out and I’d say, ‘That’s it, I’m going to have a break’ and then the next Friday would come and I’d go out again. Then this friend would phone me and remind me that I was going to have a break and I had no answer to that. Now it’s planned, so it’s less spontaneous and I’ve been doing that since September and I’ve had really good nights. Each time I’ve done it I’ve really enjoyed it and it’s been like a holiday. It’s made it all special again.” (Female 32; 9 years experience.)

Once this process of habituation has been recognised and its effect have become embodied in the outside world, then my informants began to reassess their intoxicatory patterns.

Reassessment

The experience of excess can lead to people abandoning the club intoxicants and the club space itself completely. For all my informants, though, their excesses made them wonder what they were doing and what they wanted from the world. None of them had given up going out or getting intoxicated, but they had begun to build alternative lives for themselves in which intoxication and partying still played an important social role. As one informant said:

“I can’t see myself ever stopping partying; I just love it too much; over the years the crowds change, the drugs change, I’ve changed but that’s all part of the process. I don’t get as legless as I used to; I space things out a bit more; the people become more important; they, rather than the drugs, make or break the party. I suppose it’s always been like that, but you focus on different things at different times. After all you can’t simply enjoy the same

thing over and over again, so it has to develop, as you change, or it just becomes boring and unimaginative no matter how amazing it initially feels.” (Male 59; 43 years experience.)

The party experience, housed in the club space, gives people an alternative socio-sensual environment where their world is intensified. They value this experience and over time they learn to weave it into the other parts of their lives which also hold things that they value. As one informant explained:

“It’s all about balance; it’s really fucking important to get that balance; you’ve got to be able to deal with your world sober and enjoy that world. You can’t just club it up and drug it up to keep the world at bay otherwise you’ll end up fucked. So you learn to balance things out the best you can. Meeting my boyfriend was important to me; it stopped me worrying about ending up on my own on a Saturday night if I didn’t go clubbing, so some Saturdays we stay in and chill out and others we go out and live it up. It gives you an option and the more options you can create the better because you’ve got more choices to play with.” (Female 29; 11 years experience.)

Balance was stressed by a number of my informants and, at the level of the body, this balance must be felt as a sensual tension between these disparate experiences. One informant explained this tension in these terms:

“I liked getting to the point where I felt like I was earning my parties, that I deserved to have a blow out. I space them out more and when I do go out I enjoy it more, because I’m not battling with tiredness or even that sense of ‘Here I am again doing the same thing over and over again’. I’m more confident and adventurous now; I try and find new experiences, new ways to have a good time, but I’m also more confident in other parts of my life, my work, my relationships and that’s given me other things to focus on and enjoy.” (Female 30; 12 years experience.)

This process of reassessment is pragmatic, my informants were all dedicated party people, they wanted to enjoy themselves, but this was no simple case of fitting your intoxication and party experiences into the growing demands and constraints made upon you by the everyday world. It was also about taking what you’d learnt from clubbing out into that world. The next informant said:

“I don’t want a split personality for a life. I don’t want to only feel alive on the week-ends. I want a passionate life, but if you get over reliant on the drugs to make your life passionate, then they cease to be of any use and they become destructive. I think the whole clubbing thing teaches you a lot. I learnt a different way of being with people; I learnt just how good life can feel. It sounds funny but once you’ve experienced the rush of taking drugs and going to clubs it gives you a different perspective on things; it made me realise I want to spend my time enjoying people and not constantly battling with them over stupid trivial things. You can get caught up in all the trivial

shit; it becomes a way of life and clubbing and drugging gives you a break from it; you see it for what it is, bullshit, boring, tedious bullshit, rather than thinking it's the only way the world can be. You learn to handle it, but you don't respect it, because it's not your only experience of people." (Male 34; 17 years experience.)

I will examine the knowledge people gain from clubbing in more detail in later chapters, at this point I simply want to draw attention to the fact that the alternative experiences offered by clubbing can grant different perspectives upon the world and influence the way people negotiate that world. The process of reassessment is a two way street; the everyday world encroaches upon clubbing, because that world becomes so hard to negotiate that people realise they've got to cut back. However, those that don't abandon clubbing completely retain an alternative perspective upon that everyday world and they set about negotiating it with this perspective in mind. They are attempting to bridge the gap between their clubbing experiences and their everyday experience of the world.

Chemical literacy

One of the major changes in people's intoxicatory practice, that arises from this process of reassessment, is a shift in their perspective upon intoxication. It ceases to be an end in itself and becomes more intimately linked to the social nature of the event. So, rather than striving to get "out of it", through intoxication, they alter their patterns of drug use to ensure that they can communicate with and enjoy the other people who are sharing the night with them. As one informant said:

"Getting completely bollocksed out your box can get a bit boring after a while; you want to be able to talk to people and dance with them and if you get too fucked up you can't, because you're just gurning like a loon or so fucked up on cocaine, that you can't shut up and listen to anyone; you're talking at them not to them. So I've cut back; I take a bit of E, then later on I might have a couple of lines of whizz, just to pick it up, or I'll have a bit of acid and then a bit of coke, few spliffs, if it's cool to smoke, few drinks. It's enough to keep you in there to keep you dancing and awake, but it allows you to keep it under control as well. I think a lot of it's confidence; you learn that and when you've learnt it you don't need so many drugs to feel part of the club." (Male 34; 16 years experience.)

My informants had become so familiar with the intoxicants they took, that they could tailor their consumption to suit their particular desires for the night; they utilised combinations of drugs; they paced their consumption, so that they could seize all the different aspects of the club event. It's a similar process to learning to drink; you get very drunk early on and then

learn to control your drinking over time. My informants utilised multiple intoxicants, but they played them off one another; if they felt too drunk they would have a line of speed and start drinking water; if they felt too tense they'd smoke some spliff to chill out; if they were too stoned they'd have a line of cocaine. The point they were attempting to maintain was a point of maximum engagement with the party. They wanted a certain clarity from their drugs, a sense of being in control of the intense sensual states those drugs offered, rather than just getting legless every night. The following informant explained that:

“You become more aware of the drugs you take over time; you begin to understand them more, their different effects and influences both in terms of clubbing, but also how they effect you beyond clubbing. I recognise that something like E influences the way I think when I'm doing it regularly and I've got it together more; I've got a better idea of what I want from them and what they do for me. They help me access particular experiences that I enjoy, but if I take too many of them they can destroy those experiences as well; there's a clarity to the way I take drugs now that I didn't have for a long time.” (Female 32; 9 years experience.)

This informant stresses the way her knowledge of drugs has grown over the years and that this knowledge isn't simply related to her time clubbing, but also to the way drugs affect other aspects of her life. She had become chemically literate; she wanted to take drugs but her knowledge of them had increased so they could be used as social tools utilised in the construction of experiences rather than remaining an end in themselves.

Conclusion

Intoxication in all its forms plays an important role in creating the socio-sensual intensity of clubbing, that makes clubs feel radically different from other times and spaces in people's lives. The club intoxicants help generate a range of experiences; they each have different properties and propensities, that will be heightened or occasionally destroyed by the “set and setting” of the particular club they're taken in. Ecstasy was important in shifting people's ideas about what constitutes a good night out and its arrival revitalised the nightlife of this country. It facilitated the change into an alternate social and sensual experience of the night in opposition to the booze fuelled sociality that preceded it. That shift defined the model of what a club should feel like for punters and made them more intense spaces. This model has shifted as fashions and intoxicants changed. Ecstasy is only one intoxicant amongst many that now play a role in generating the party.

Intoxication changes over time; it has a pattern and people's knowledge of their chosen intoxicants deepens with experience, rather than ending up "completely screwed" by years of taking drugs; my informants have become chemically literate. This is not an unproblematic process it has its risks and its dangers, but my informants believed that these risks had been worth taking from their own personal perspective, because the times they had spent intoxicated had added something they valued to their lives.

Sex

“Humans are erotic beings and they need somewhere they can go to celebrate and share that side of their nature.” (Tuppy Owen: per com)

Introduction

I want to examine sex as part of the sensual fun of clubbing by paying special attention to the highly social, expressive and voyeuristic forms of sexual play that people engage in within club spaces. The search for sex, companionship and intimacy suffuses the sensuality of clubland. Yet we should be careful when we define the sexuality of clubland, because the club arena provides a space for at least four forms of sexual experience. The first is the search for sex; the game of seduction that plays a large but curiously un-sung part of the desire to club, no matter what the club space. The second is the sensuality of expressing your own sexuality, of feeling sexual, of displaying your own body for your own satisfaction and enjoyment; again this is not limited to sex clubs, as we saw in the chapter on dance, it is part of the whole field of clubbing. The third is the creation of communities based around a shared sexual orientation like the gay or lesbian scene. The fourth is sharing sex, being amongst sexual people, engaging in sexual play, exploring and discovering new aspects of your sexual self in a specifically sexual environment. This aspect of sex is most highly visible in the sex club scene

The sex club scene is far smaller than the mainstream club scene but it is growing and becoming more visible. Like the drug aesthetic, the aesthetics of fetishism have become part of the mainstream media's visual arsenal. The latex and leather look has become the symbolic expression of sexual power games and sexual difference, the height of sensual chic, with Gucci jewelled wrist restraints selling out in days of their arrival in-store. The sex club inverts the history of sexual morality by creating a sublime social tolerance which filled this clubbing arena with the added erotic frisson of sexual expression. Taboos were smashed by becoming visible and shared; retaining just enough of their transgressional allure to keep them saucy and passionate. All of the other elements of clubland remain intact and not everybody has sex; people dance and talk and chill out, as in every other club space, but there is enough visible sex to move the space one step further away from the everyday world.

The sexuality of clubbing

Sexual desire is a clubbing constant regardless of race, age, gender or sexual orientation; the only difference is how much it is expressed in the visual make-up of the club. One informant put it like this; I'd been asking him questions in the queue where he'd told me he was mainly at the club for the music, but when I met him again inside the club, after he'd had a few beers, he said:

"I'm here to try and get laid; I think most people are; you just don't admit it because somehow it's not cool."

One of the promoters I talked to reiterated this idea, while also revealing the important role finding a sexual partner plays in people's desire to club:

A: "People club for different reasons but the hope of finding a partner is always there. It's quite funny, when you're on the scene you see people turn up every week for a few months, going out every night, having a wicked time, going to all the different places on a certain scene, say a Drum and Bass scene, telling you that they're mad for the music and the scene and then they meet a girl or a boy and they don't come very often. It's part of that finding a partner process and a club is a good place to find a partner, because people are showing off, people are looking good."

Q: "Is there less of a drive to pull in clubs than there used to be?"

A: "It has changed, but it's still one of the elements; it is just not as blatant in a lot of clubs, but it's one of the driving forces in all clubs, that will never go away." (Male)

The men and women of clubland enjoy the sexual frisson that hangs in the air of a club. They want to be checked out sexually; they want to flirt, be admired for their looks, their dancing, their seductive allure; it's all part of the fun of clubbing. The sexual gaze plays a huge role in intensifying the experience of the party in all club spaces. The phatic communication of eyes devouring flesh, the smiles that keeps such looks from becoming oppressive, the sensual exuberance of the night all combine to raise the temperature of the event. Like drugs, sex is becoming a leisure pursuit that is gradually being deproblematised in terms of the Christian and Protestant perspectives, which viewed it as a morally degenerate social force. People fuck for fun; it is part of the sensuality of clubbing, the cherry on top of an already delicious cake. As one informant explained:

"I love watching women and men dance; I love watching sexy people doing sexy things. I mean actual sex shows are damned boring. I've seen girls dancing and they're turning me on like a bastard. I'm sitting there thinking, 'Oh fuck the things I want to do to your body'. Then I've seen live sex

shows, full penetration, double barrels, the works and I'm sitting there going, 'Big deal this is boring'. If I've gone clubbing and I've had way too much speed or E to have sex, but I've had a fantastic night, then it doesn't bother me if I don't get laid, because I'm feeling really fucking good anyway. It changes the rules of the game in some ways. I've been talking to girls before in a club and I like them and we're getting on and it's come to the point where you know you're getting somewhere, but when it's come to the crunch, I've had to turn round to them and say, 'Look I'm really sorry but there's no way on earth I'm gonna be able to have sex with you tonight I am completely drug fucked, even a miracle from the lord wouldn't give me an erection, but I still think you're absolutely fantastic and lovely, so if you stay over tonight we can crash out, chill, talk, watch vids whatever and in the morning we can fuck for as long as you want.' and it's worked and when I've had good drugs the night before, the next morning, shit, I'm gagging for a fuck, so we get to spend the day in bed." (Male 26; 8 years experience.)

This statement is interesting for a number of reasons. Firstly it gives a good picture of just how sexually charged clubs can be and how punters enjoy being part of this sexually seductive environment. Secondly it reveals how the sensual intensity of clubbing can make finding a sexual partner less of a priority at times, because clubbers are already experiencing a high level of bodily immersion into the space, the crowds and the experience, as a whole. Hence my suggestion that sex becomes the cherry on top of the cake; a metaphor I suggested to the same informant who replied:

"Yeah I think that's very valid; you'd rather have the whole cake than just the cherry and you can fuck up a night if all you're trying to do is eat the cherry and ignore the cake, but then sometimes you really do just want to go out and get laid, so I guess a lot of it depends upon your mood and how horny you're feeling, but I can see what you mean." (Male 26; 8 years experience.)

The visceral and bodily nature of clubbing can be as intense as sex in the level of physical immersion and participation people experience when clubbing, particularly through dancing. It's obviously not the same thing as sex, though it can just be as physically and emotionally intense as sex. When this sensual intensity becomes the bodily platform, out of which the process of seduction and sexual consummation arises, then sex itself is intensified beyond its own, more sober, sensual parameters. However, I am specifically speaking here of regular dance clubs. As we saw, in the intoxication chapter, the "set and setting" of a club night can "program" the crowd's experience by guiding them in a specific direction and some clubs provide a far more overtly sexualised environment, that immediately eroticises the sensual experience of clubbing to a higher degree, by making its sexual nature more visible. Sex clubs lie at the visible end of this spectrum.

Sex Clubs (See Appendices for fuller ethnographic description)

The sex party has its own genealogy, which lies outside of the rave culture discussed in most of the texts about clubbing. Sexual spaces have always existed in our society but their growth, as a visible social form, has accelerated since London's first commercial sex club opened in 1986. The ARC party, discussed in the appendices, was somewhat different from your standard fetish club; it was more blatantly about sex and expression and much less about fashion and conformity to the particular sexual model, that has grown up around the fetish scene. It had an air of frivolity that some fetish clubs, with their human sea of black leather, rubber and PVC, can sometimes lack. In fetish clubs the S&M, bondage gig provides the main sexual show, but at the ARC party there was less S&M and more glammed up, flesh on flesh fucking by punters, which gave it a "swinging, groovy, 1960s feel", although there was still a place set aside for S&M play and it was busy for the entire night.

The sex club adds an extra dimension to the club experience. The crowds are there to revel in these sexual environments and will tolerate far more extreme forms of sexual display than a normal club could cope with. The imposition of a code of etiquette formalises the basic social practices of clubland into a more rigid social framework, that is designed to both protect and liberate the sexual nature of the event. While the operation of strict dress codes attempts to ensure that the gawpers are kept out. This exclusivity is unfortunately a necessary practice, because the environment of the sex club is another step further removed from the everyday world and some people can just find it too much: they get scared, feel insecure and threatened, morally outraged or just plain freaked out and over excited to the point where they get legless, abusive and intrusive.

Sex clubs are not orgies where simply walking through the door will guarantee that you'll get laid. The same social rules that operate across the rest of clubland also operate in this space. Not everybody who attends wants to fuck or flagellate. Many are simply enjoying the expression of a particularly sexual persona, that allows them to wear what they like, behave in especially sexual ways, explore their fantasies and exhibit their desires. They can do these things for themselves without necessarily wanting to share them with anyone else.

The expressivity of these club spaces is based on an intensification of the freedoms offered by clubs and if you followed the particular party pathways, that I wandered into during my field work, you'd get to see a gradual shift in expressive content. As crowds got older, queerer or arose from some areas of the black clubbing gig, the sensual rush of seductive

dressing and sexual display became more visible and less timid. They were overtly celebrated as part of clubbing. The amount of actual sex, that resulted from these club nights, may well have remained very similar to other clubs. The sheer rush of this seductive sexual aesthetic changed the relationship between these spaces and the everyday world. Rather than seeing this shift as a rise in the lust content of the space it should be seen as a particular form of sexual expressivity.

I met a lot of couples in clubland who relished the chance to glam up and savour one another's seductive allure. They got to witness a different version of each other's personas that can so often be forgotten during endless nights of watching television in the living room, while scagging around in shapeless casuals. The joys of watching your lover dressed to thrill and getting slinky on a dancefloor, as eyes feast upon their flesh, is a potent act of re-sensualisation that can reawaken desires numbed by the sensual mundanity of the everyday world. As one informant explained:

"I love it when we (he and his wife) get all dressed up and come out; look at her she's amazing, but these are the only places we'd have the confidence to dress like this and fuck she turns me on when she does. It gives you an excuse to be really sexy, to make that extra effort, you get tarted up and flirt and dance and just enjoy being with all these funky, sexy people. We always shag like bunnies when we get home, we're so turned on." (Male)

It doesn't have to go any further than this; simply being in a space where people celebrate and savour sex, where they dress to arouse both themselves and others, has its own sensual rewards. However, other people do take it further they enjoy sharing their lovers with others and experimenting with sexual desire. Take this example from the Sex Maniacs Ball, as recounted by its organiser Tuppy Owen:

"We had a lot of space that year so we'd set up a drive-in movie area with some cars and a screen with porn films playing. One couple got into a car and things started getting fairly hot, so that a crowd gathered; the couple were fucking away, obviously really turned on and they kept it up for hours. The crowd would change but they didn't stop. Anyway I saw them at the end of the night and they were really excited; they came over and said, 'Thanks' and how great the night had been. Then they said that they'd never really imagined that they could have got off on doing such a thing. The Sex Maniacs was the first sexually orientated party they had been to; they thought it would be an adventure, but they got the surprise of their lives at how turned on they'd got. Anyway, a few months later, I heard from them again; they had set up a club in their home town and it was doing really well and they were really enthusiastic about it. So just from that one discovery they had changed their lives fairly dramatically and it was permanent change; they'd discovered something about themselves that they hadn't known existed."

This is sex as a shared sensual adventure; a process of discovery that turns vague often unarticulated desires into socially sanctioned realities. You can find desires in sex clubs; you can witness sexual scenarios that you may not have considered and find yourself becoming aroused by them. You get to see sex as a game played by consenting adults, rather than a practice bounded by the rules of monogamy and sexual propriety.

One of the first things I noticed about the whole sex club scene was how quickly you got used to it. It ceased to look strange after 20 minutes in the space, because the social vibe was so obviously benign. The level of participation varies amongst the crowds; everyone is dressed up, because that is an entry requirement, but not everyone will engage in some form of visible sexual practice. So some punters will use the dungeon and put on shows for others. Some will enjoy being sexual creatures and revealing themselves as such to the world. Some will end up having sex. At one night I ended up sitting next to a couple, who looked in their late forties, the guy was naked except for a cock strap and a snakeskin jacket, his partner was wearing lingerie and sat beside me while giving the guy a blow job. It felt a bit odd for a while, but they were just enjoying themselves; they were luxuriating in the attention as people glanced at them or stopped to watch and they carried on for about 10 minutes, before stopping and moving off to the bar. This wasn't hardcore sex; they giggled as they headed to the bar; it was sexual play in a safe space.

The majority of punters tend not to engage in public sex; they are there to enjoy the sexual vibe of the space, to dress up and delight in an alternate sexual reality, to savour its erotic edge. It is a world of seductive glances and lascivious smiles, of overtly sexual bodies getting down on the dancefloor, people smiling and laughing and getting "turned on". It is also incredibly courteous, some of the most polite spaces in clubland. This sensuous sociality is as important as the sex, itself, it creates a conspiratorial edge grounded in a movement away from the moral sensibilities of the everyday world and, as such, it socially sanctions this alternate moral perspective in which consent is the foundational rule upon which the environment is built. Sex ceases to be a furtive private act; it does not have to "speak" in Foucault's terms in order to justify itself, but can simply be a Saturday night leisure option wherein its passion and playfulness becomes visible and is celebrated by those present.

The sex clubs also had the greatest age range of any of the club scenes; it was not rare to see people in their 70s enjoying the delights of the space and the crowd tended to be older in general. There were a number of reasons for this shift. Firstly these older crowds were more socially confident so they could dare to be overtly sexual in public. Secondly they had more

money; they could afford to spend a couple of hundred pounds on a latex cat-suit and up to £25 just to get through the door. Thirdly as Tuppy Owen explained:

“A lot of people begin to explore the fetish clubs or swingers’ scene when their children have all grown up and left home; it’s something they can share together once they’ve stopped living their lives through their kids; it’s an erotic adventure.”

This age range from between 20-70 gave these clubs an eclectic feel; they revealed that the search for socio-sensual pleasure didn’t end at 26, but continued for as long as people were willing to make the effort to get out to these spaces.

Sex and Drugs

The last dimension of club sex I want to look at is the relationship between sex and drugs. This is a relationship that occurs in all areas of clubbing, in fact sex clubs often seemed less “druggy” than other clubs, because their primary focus was on sex. Drugs can radically alter the way people experience sex, because they shift the sensual and social parameters of those sexual encounters.

Certainly sex on Class A drugs is very different from sex on alcohol, which can often boil down to 20 minutes of rather uncoordinated “rumpy-pumpy”, followed by immediate collapse. Sex on Class A drugs tends to go on far longer; you can afford to relax more; you have more energy. There is no dip in desire in clubs amongst people on a drug like ecstasy, it’s just that this desire travels down an altered socio-sensual path. It is articulated and experienced differently because it arises from within an altered sensual state. Just being touched feels wild, as does kissing, licking and watching. There’s also the communicative quality of the club intoxicants which, when part of a sexual encounter, changes the way people talk about sex; they are franker and more open about it. Sex becomes less antsy and more relaxed.

Some male informants say they have problems sustaining an erection on drugs, others don’t. It depends upon the drugs and how long they’re actually engaged in sex. As one informant said:

“Your hard-on can come and go when you’re having sex on ecstasy or any other drug really, partly because of the drugs, partly because you spend so long fucking that it gets tired and disappears. It doesn’t matter though you just change what you’re doing or have a break, maybe a spliff and a laugh. Penetration stops being the be all and end all of fucking; you get more imaginative and inventive. I’ve probably learnt more about fucking by

losing my hard-on, than I would've if it had stayed, because even when it's gone it doesn't mean the fun has to stop. When you're drugged up your whole body can feel like a dick so the fact that your six inches of prime love has gone wonky isn't so relevant." (Male 34; 16 years experience.)

Another said:

"I enjoy having sex on cocaine but sometimes I really can't cum; it's like your dick turns into a dildo; it can stay up but it goes numb so orgasming is really difficult. It used to drive me mad, but I've got my head round it now and I just get off on what's happening; I can always finish off next morning when the feeling's back in it." (Male)

You can certainly take too many drugs to be able to have or enjoy sex and the sensation of numbness my informant speaks of is not an uncommon one, but if you don't over indulge in them drugs can alter the socio-sensual experience of sex quite dramatically. Cocaine and speed can give you the energy of a sexual dynamo and the numbness, that can accompany them, doesn't mean you necessarily lose your erection, it can stay, but it just does not feel as intense. The up-side is that sex goes on longer because premature ejaculation ceases to be a problem. An informant said:

"I like sex on E because it's more relaxed; it's more like a long and intense session of foreplay than a quick 15 minute shag and I prefer that. You touch and stroke and fuck and touch and laugh and fuck; it's not so mechanical; it's far more fluid; it lasts longer and feels different more intense." (Female 34; 16 years experience.)

This sexual element is an important part of all drug experiences; sex and drugs compliment one another and radically alter the sensual intensity of people's sexual encounters. Both at a physical level in terms of how their body feels during sex and at a social level in the way people interact with one another during sex. A number of informants said that they enjoyed smoking marijuana before having sex because, like a couple of drinks, it relaxed them. As we saw in the brief section on psychedelics, one of my female informants stressed how much she enjoyed sex on L.S.D a point of view reiterated by Timothy Leary:

"I am saying simply that sex under LSD becomes miraculously enhanced and intensified. I don't mean that it simply generates genital energy. It doesn't automatically produce a longer erection. Rather, it increases your sensitivity a thousand percent. Let me put it this way: Compared with sex under LSD, the way you've been making love-no matter how ecstatic the pleasure you think you get from it-is like making love to a department-store-window dummy." (Leary 1990:127)

From my own experience I would add that a high degree of trust between partners and a knowledge of the effects of LSD were as important as the drug itself during sexual

encounters, otherwise they can become confusing because of LSD's ability to warp the way you feel and see the world. As one informant explained:

"Sex on acid can get a bit freaky; you can't work out where you end and the other person begins. You look at them and they can mutate in front of you; they can seem skeletal or wolflike; it can take you a moment to recognise them, but if you're with someone you trust then these feelings just add to the sex, because they don't get scary they're just exciting." (Female 41; 19 years experience.)

For the vast majority of clubbers the relationship between sex and drugs is explored away from the club space, but it is an important part of the club/drug experience that radically alters the socio-sensual parameters of sex. When combined sex and drugs alter and intensify the experience of each other, but as one informant pointed out:

"Fucking and druggin's great, but you have to be careful; you can get careless. I've been so out of it that I've forgotten to put a condom on and that's risky. So now I like to get prepared have plenty of condoms, unwrap a couple so I've got them at hand, take my time. It just means I don't have to wake up in a panic the next day." (Male 32; 14 years experience.)

Conclusion

Sex is an important part of all clubbing. It is part of the sensual fabric of the club space and it suffuses the sociality of clubbing. In sex clubs this sexual element is made overt and visible; it becomes the sensual practice around which the club coalesces and the social rules of sex clubs are designed to both liberate and protect the sexually expressive nature of the event. Sex becomes public and playful, an adult game, based upon open and honest consent between punters. The sexual vibe is as important as the amount of actual sex housed within sex clubs; it acts as a seductive force, which binds the crowds together, and marks out the sensuality of the space in opposition to the sexual codes that operate in the everyday world. When sex and drugs are combined, usually after the club event itself, then they intensify the way each is experienced and radically shift the socio-sensual parameters of those sexual encounters. My informants valued these shifts and enjoyed sex on drugs as a heightened experience of sex, that allowed them to expand upon the sensual parameters of their sexual worlds.

Dressed to Thrill

(See “Dressing Up” section on video)

Introduction

Dressing up plays a significant role in all areas of clubbing. For many clubbers putting on their “Glad-Rags” was one way of marking the club space out as different from their everyday world. There were various degrees of dressing up operating across clubland, as a whole, ranging from putting on a new dress or shirt, to people wearing “big looks” and completely altering their public persona for the night. There was a cross-over between the sex clubs, of the previous chapter, and the most extreme dress up clubs, both stressed expressivity and imagination, both had door codes to ensure a high level of participation, both were grounded in creating spaces of safety and tolerance wherein punters could risk experimentation.

There was a curious paradox at the heart of clublands attitude towards dressing up, namely that spaces which had no dress codes tended to produce crowds who looked predominantly the same, while spaces that had dress codes created big variations in the way people looked. When left to their own devices people tended towards conformity, when pushed to participate they created difference. The dress up clubs examined, in this chapter, were not “fashion” venues, in that their exclusivity didn’t arise from enforcing an economic distinction, based upon the labels of the fashion world; this was a particular style of dress up club that I never gained access to. Instead, the dress up clubs I visited were spaces that demanded an effort from their punters and, as you can see from the illustrations to this chapter, they celebrated personal creativity and expressivity over the dull conformity of that label culture.

Dressing up is a sensual practice, which can be both serious and playful; it alters the way you feel in the world and the way other people perceive you. The sensual experience of dressing up has often been ignored in academic examinations of clothes and style, which focused on their symbolic properties (Hebdige 1976). In this section I want to redress this balance and examine the sensual expressivity and creative participation that these dress up clubs encouraged and housed.

Putting on the Glitz

“When I go out I dress up and wear something skimpy and dance outrageously it makes me feel better. You go out and feel special for the evening, rather than just being stuck in your drab work clothes. There’s a whole ritual about getting ready, making yourself feel good, getting dressed, getting your make up on, putting your glitz on if you like. I have a whole clubbing wardrobe, which isn’t just comfort clothing and that’s important to me. I don’t like going out straight from work in the same clothes; it’s never as much fun. I went through a stage of wearing little cut off tops under my work stuff, so I could transform when I went out and anything that goes mad under UV light is always good, because it glows when you get into a club. I like that; it stops me feeling grey.” (Female 32; 9 years experience.)

The above quotation is interesting for a number of reasons. Firstly, it gives us an insight into the process of personal transformation, that plays an important role in marking the club night out as special event. Secondly, it reveals that this transformation is about making my informant feel different, by shifting her from her “drab” everyday self into her “glitzy” party self. Thirdly, it shows that this shift into wearing something “skimpy” and dancing “outrageously” is an experience my informant enjoys and values; it makes her feel “better” about clubbing. Fourthly, she mentions that she has clubbing clothes that aren’t necessarily designed for comfort. Together these statements reveal that my informant’s clubbing self is constructed through a process of self-objectification; she creates this version of herself in opposition to her “drab”, “comfortable” work self.

In “*The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*” Erving Goffman reveals how the world of work shapes the way we present ourselves. To use Goffman’s own terms:

“Firstly, it often happens that the performance serves mainly to express the characteristics of the task that is performed and not the characteristics of the performer. Thus one finds that service personnel, whether in profession, bureaucracy, business, or craft, enliven their manner with movements which express proficiency and integrity, but, whatever this manner conveys about them, often its major purpose is to establish a favourable definition of their service or product.” (Goffman 1990:83)

Clubbing offers the above informant the chance to change the way she expresses herself in public, freed from the representational requirements of her work, she can stress different aspects of her own personality, by revealing that self as an altered social object. Yet, I would suggest, that this process is more sensual, than symbolic, she feels this transformation and it makes clubbing “better”, because she can sense these external alterations to her appearance; they become part of her clubbing body and in turn they alter the way other

people relate to her in the club space. She mentions the “ritual” of putting on her “glitz”, the process of making herself more desirable, seductive and visible; she wears skimpy revealing clothes; she can be more outrageous; she has dressed to party.

Yet this isn’t necessarily an act of resistance to her other work self, such an idea is too simplistic; my informant enjoyed her work; it gave her an outlet for her skills; she was highly proficient in her job. However, her work imposed specific sensual boundaries on her behaviour and the forms of self representation she engaged in. She couldn’t wear anything skimpy; she couldn’t behave outrageously, but she accepted these curtailments as a necessary part of a job she enjoyed. Rather we should think of this transformative process as an extension of her sense of self. Clubbing is an act of world building in which the sensual parameters, which encompass the everyday worlds of punters, are shifted and new ones created. Dressing up plays an important role in making you ready to party, even if it’s just sticking on a bit of lippy and wearing a favourite T-shirt, these changes count as part of the process of clubbing; you’re going out; you’re going to be social and feeling good about yourself makes this process easier to negotiate. It pulls you into party mode; it makes you visible, but on your own terms; you become ready to be seen and socialise. These visible selves are sensual selves that are created through altering the way in which people experience and express their own bodies, particularly in the way they construct that body as an object and so change the way it experiences the “gaze” of others. At work, at home, on the street, or in a club people objectify themselves in alternate ways. They reduce or increase their physical presence; they move from public anonymity to public display depending, as Goffman (1990) points out, upon the social situation they’re in at any given time.

Fetish clubs often have changing rooms for their punters, so that they can negotiate the street in relative anonymity before transforming into their visible clubbing self. For many punters the street is too exposed to risk standing out and the relative safety of the club arena offers them an alternate environment in which they can express and experience their own sense of self within a crowd. The way a crowd dresses adds to the sensual charge of the club space; it marks it out as different from the everyday world. There are degrees of difference operating in club spaces. As one informant pointed out:

“Well some crowds could be anywhere, they look like they’re dressed to go shopping or something, and then other crowds look like they’ve come from another planet. I prefer that; it makes sense to me, because clubs are one of the few places that you can get away with really dressing up; it’s one of the freedoms clubs offer, but it’s only pushed to its limits in certain clubs which

is a shame, because dressing up is fun; it adds a lot to the night.” (Male 33; 17 years experience.)

This statement reveals another important aspect of the dressing up process: it is fun in itself and people enjoy playing with the way they look. As one informant pointed out:

“The dressing up thing, the changing the self, I don’t always go out as myself exactly, I quite enjoy not going as myself. I went through a stage of dressing slightly like a ballroom dancer, make up wise and stuff, it didn’t last too long, thank god. That was a character I didn’t even particularly like, but I was just enjoying the bizzareness of it for a while. I don’t just try and look the best I can, or something, in fact I sometimes enjoy doing the opposite.” (Female 30; 10 years experience)

So looking “good” isn’t always the goal. People experiment with different looks, different characters, different visible selves, that range from looking great, in a more conventional sense, to looking downright bizarre.

However, the type of club you enter places limits on what you can get away with wearing. Take this example from my fieldwork notes:

“Saturday night at Club V, which prided itself on not having a dress code and being a ‘real’ clubber venue. I was in the cloakroom talking to a clubbing buddy, a woman walked in with a group of friends to drop her coat off and I got chatting to her. She had immaculately bleached hair, cut short, and was wearing a vivid red, very tight and glamorous looking dress and a pair of red heels. She looked great; it was her birthday and she was wearing her presents and had just had her hair done. They were all looking forward to a good night, although she hadn’t been to the Club V before. A little later on I saw her in the main space itself, the vibrant red of her clothing meant that she was impossible to miss, but she didn’t look altogether happy. A couple of hours later, well before the end of the night, I saw the woman and her friends about to leave the club. I asked them why they were leaving early she replied, ‘I don’t feel comfortable, everybody keeps staring at me, I don’t feel like I fit in. There’s just loads of attitude going on.’ I went back into the main section of the club and looked around, on this Saturday night in the middle of the most diverse metropolis in the country, in a club that claimed that you could wear what you wanted, everyone looked the same.”

This woman was made to feel uncomfortable, because she didn’t fit into the idea of clubbing that the space was grounded in. She was too “glamorous” for this crowd to handle. Her visibility itself was the problem; it caught the eye and drew them to her, but the looks it brought weren’t experienced by her as friendly and supportive. The presumption of crowd mutuality is challenged by this visibility; the crowd is only the crowd if no-one stands out from it. If they do then the perspectival nature of the “gaze” comes into play; it is focused upon this difference and its unwavering stare, whether it intends to or not, annihilates this

difference by making the person experience the sensual weight of being visible and standing out. This incident needs to be put in perspective, this was not an un-friendly crowd and I don't believe they had intentionally ostracised her. They just couldn't stop looking at her and this made her uncomfortable. However because of the current range of different clubs, people can usually find an arena in which the way they want to express themselves will be tolerated and celebrated.

Uber Drag and Rubber Nurses

The dress-up clubs I visited allowed clothes to become fun again and celebrated individual expression, as an important part of the crowd making process. The game is to have a look, to be seen, and people enjoy this alteration in their sense of self. People create characters and alter egos; they perform these alternate selves within the club space which becomes their creative and expressive arena. Drag queens are one extreme example of this phenomena; they perform constantly; they adopt names and personas; they add a theatricality to the club event, that again marks the space out as different from the everyday world

When dressing up becomes a major part of a club's identity then it moves beyond the simple act of putting on you "glitz" and becomes a far more expressive and imaginative part of clubbing. Everything we said about dressing up in the previous section is intensified. There is a fancy dress feel about these spaces; clothes become costumes in dress up clubs; they are an integral part of the aesthetic of the club space and people get to alter their public persona to a far greater degree than in other clubs. Big looks need a big space, in which they can be contextualised, otherwise they can bring too much attention from the rest of the crowd. However, the door codes operating in these spaces guarantee a mutual level of participation, in terms of getting everybody to make the effort to dress up. As one door picker explained:

"Some people arrive in a pair of jeans and a T-shirt and then get all arsey about the fact we have a door code and you try to explain to them that it's what the night's all about, dressing up having a laugh, we're throwing a party here. There're loads of clubs that don't have a door code, but they want to come here because they've heard it's a great night, but it's only a great night because the crowd makes a fucking effort and some people just can't get their head round that fact. They want to be part of it, but they don't want to make the fucking effort to become part of it." (Male)

The club creates the context both socially and aesthetically and, by demanding a certain level of participation, they ensure that people won't feel uncomfortable or become too

visible in the crowd, unless they want to be, in which case they have to push their look even further. The Dress Up club environment was liberating because it expanded the parameters of what people will dare to wear.

I saw similar transformations occur at other nights and once a crowd has gained the confidence to start dressing up then it seemed to swiftly become an integral part of their clubbing experiences, because it expands upon the freedoms offered by the club space. I have seen people dressed as rubber nurses, leather bishops, go-go girls, cowboys, dandy-highwayman, wonder woman, a hammerhead shark accompanied by a Furby, carnival queens, freakish clowns, ringmasters, Victorian school teachers, voodoo priests, devils, bunny girls and boys, drag queens, transvestites of all shapes and sizes, big-baby's, angels, pantomime horses, 1940s filmstars, and they were just the looks I could vaguely categorise. One of my favourite costumes was simply a guy who'd stuck multi-coloured scouring pads to his head and wore them with a black suit; every time the light caught him the scourers would glitter like jewels, simple, cheap, very effective.

This was a highly creative club environment; many of the "looks" were home made and people had put a great deal of effort into their construction. They were big, imaginative costumes that challenged the basic conformity of the world of fashion. This was not the space to feel glamorous in a little black Gucci dress, because you would have quite simply looked dull in comparison to the rest of the crowd, who'd eschewed the classificatory labels of fashion in favour of personal expression. As one informant explained:

"I have a P.V.C cheerleaders outfit I made myself a while back. It's beginning to fall apart so now I wear it looking all fucked up. The arm got split, because I've buffed up since I made it, and I thought well either I don't wear it or I use it. I put this cross belt thing on it, strapped toy guns on my legs, then gaffer taped a couple of light pens onto the shoulders. It was my "Columbine High Cheerleader" look. There's a lot of creativity in clubs and personally I find it a more valid form of creativity than most of the stuff I've seen in the Tate Modern, because people aren't being up their own arse; they're being true, because the only place this creativity is coming from is themselves. They do it for themselves and for the party. You know, call me cynical, but I have a nasty feeling that the art world's just about money and bullshit nowadays, while this is just about people making stuff for the joy of it." (Male 26; 8 years experience.)

This statement further stressed the creative aspects of these nights and their role as an alternative arena for expressing this creativity, that exists well away from the confines of the art world. These nights reveal the importance of this creativity in people's lives; they stress

that clubbing is an arena of production, as much as it is an space of consumption, because in the last instance only the crowd can make the night.

Dressing Up as a Sensual Experience

Clothes are sensual to wear they change the way your body feels. Whether this is the comfort of cosy casuals or the fetishistic allure of leather, latex and fur, clothes impact upon the body and alter its presence in the world. Like the informant who opened this chapter I personally wouldn't feel comfortable in a club unless I'd dressed up, but the symbolic aspects of this process means little to me. Clothes make my body feel right for clubbing; they pull me into clubbing mode. In Hebdige's (1976) analysis of the clothing styles of punk his stress on the symbolic obscures what for me was the most important aspect of the punk look. When I went through my punky stage, around 16 years ago, my mohawk, fishnets, doctor martens and leathers changed my body at a visceral level. They acted as armour, so that they both got me looked at, but also steeled me against the ensuing "gaze" by giving me confidence. It was a total aesthetic, rather than a cluster of symbols to be read. Looking different confuses people; they're not sure how to deal with you. The clothes changed the way I carried myself in public, I felt bigger, more in-the-world. The clothes I wear now are very different, but they have the same effect on me. Getting dressed up to go out is a highly sensual act of bodily transformation.

In the appendices I described the Arc party, where I met two women who had dressed up to the point where they couldn't stand or sit down comfortably. Yet they felt good, black rubber corsets, five inch heeled "fuck-me pumps", micro minis; they weren't "on the pull" in fact I got the impression they were lovers. They had dressed for themselves and each other and, despite their discomfort, they had become seductive creatures. I use the term creatures, because the notion of objectification demeans humans it only allows them to become a constellation of signs to be consumed by others, whereas I am speaking of the sensual rush of becoming a sexual creature; the internality of the experience, rather than its external symbolism. I could have "read" their clothes symbolically: as signs of power, as symbols of conformity to the media's portrayal of sexual women, as a sub-cultural statement, but I didn't because I was too busy desiring the women who wore them and who were obviously enjoying wearing them. I wanted to talk to them or ravish them, more than I wanted to dissect or analyse them. Wearing such clothes takes a degree of confidence, clubs offer spaces where people can set about gaining that confidence in a relatively safe environment.

How you wear clothes is as important as what you wear; they become an extension of the flesh; your posture must suit the clothes you've got on; they must feel like you, but they can also change the self by stressing different aspects of that self. They can be sexual, playful, imaginative, glamorous, colourful or comfortable; they can be tongue-in-cheek or serious. Whatever they are they must make people feel good and in the club space they must make them feel like partying and this is a deeply embodied sensation.

The Vibe

(See “The Vibe” section on video)

“I am not a gigolo although sometimes I act like one and I am deadly serious about us having fun.” (Spearhead: People in The Middle)

So far we have focused upon the various sensual experiences that generate the sensual intensity of the club space: the aesthetics, the music, the dancing and the intoxication. In this section I want to examine how these sensual and seductive aspects, of the club experience, are intimately woven into the forms of social practice that make up the all important vibe of a club. The vibe is the foundation upon which clubs are built and the most essential element of that vibe is the way in which the crowds interact with one another. This style of interaction arises gradually and can be seen as a gradual shift from everyday forms of social practice into the social practices of clubbing itself. There is a sensual hermeneutics at play in the club space: the sensual intensity effects the sociality, which in turn deepens this sensual intensity and so on, as the night progresses. The consequent social experience was the aspect of clubbing most valued by my informants, clubbing was about enjoying themselves and enjoying other people. However, this vibe must be seen in relation to the social experiences found in the everyday world, for they provide a counterpoint, a sensual tension, that, I will argue, plays a role in granting the club experience its sense of meaningfulness to punters. It is important to remember that I am not predominantly talking about ideological differences, but rather experiences of the body. Clubbing is not driven by ideas and the sensual oscillation between the everyday world and the club world is experienced by clubbers as an enjoyable alteration in bodies, minds and social behaviour, that becomes part of their lifestyle and their engagement with the world..

The Social Genesis of the Club Space

From my fieldwork notes:

“Went home to see my Dad with K; weekend off from the rigors of the club scene; expecting to chat, watch t.v, sink some ice cold lagers. On arrival we’re told one of the neighbours is having a party; my Dad’s game to go so we agree to accompany him. It’s a small affair about 15 people, no music blaring out, no lights swirling or sweaty bodies dancing, just some tasty nibbles, chatting and a few drinks. Seemingly nothing like a club. There’s certainly no connection to the drug/dance trajectory that club land has

followed. Yet there is something, a process which is unfolding, a state of convivial sociality, of bodies and minds relaxing, not in terms of sinking into a heap but a more energised type of relaxation, that happens wherever friends meet up, but which can spread out to include strangers like K and I. Some of these people know my Dad, some don't, but there is a sense of being made welcome of being allowed into the event. D is an excellent hostess embodying the role perfectly, laughing, joking, fetching, making people comfortable. In terms of intensity this evening is almost the polar opposite of the club space, but even in this gentle form the core sociality of clubland flickers. People are smiling, nattering away, pulling each others legs; K and I join in, chatting, finding common ground across a fairly broad gap in terms of our interests and experiences. Yet the party makes such difference largely trivial; the idea is to enjoy yourself with other people, that's why everyone's here, scoffing tasty cocktail sausages, sharing stories, enjoying themselves. I would suggest that many of the people here would look at K and I in a distinctly odd manner if they saw us in the street, we look a little weird in suburbia, but in the social space of the party the way we look does not deter anyone from speaking to us. We have novelty value for sure, but it seems that in the party there are no strangers only fellow party goers, who must be made welcome in some way. Of course this is a much smaller space than a club, and everyone has been invited, which immediately makes a social connection based upon inclusion within a particular social network. The structures are therefore radically different, yet there is something, a certain social and emotional perspective, that I recognise from my fieldwork: a party style of being-in-the-world. I get talking to a guy, he's retired, we chat about what I'm doing. He looks a little incredulous, but interested, his take on the whole project, 'People need pleasure'. I couldn't agree with him more. The form that pleasure takes may appear radically different but, in social terms, there is a linkage, which relies on a slippage in social formality, that tentatively challenges the notion of separateness and difference; a recognition that we, this room, these people are the party; it is they that will allow the pleasures of the party to bloom. You make the best of them or your shot at pleasure is over."

The party is the heart of clubbing; all the social interactions found in clubs can be found within common notions of what makes a good party: a welcoming, friendly environment, a loosening up of social boundaries, a bit of intoxication to grease the party's wheels, laughter, smiles, communication and inclusivity. That's the social basis of the party and it requires a certain level of mutual participation to succeed; everyone has to play by the social rules or else the party can't happen. This model of the party has existed far longer than clubbing and throughout the 20th century it has been intensified by the inclusion of various intoxicants. The roaring 1920s roared with cocaine; the 1950s found speed; the 1960s weed and L.S.D.; the 1970s went back to speed; the 1980s fell for cocaine and then ecstasy arrived and became the drug of choice until the mid 1990s, after which cocaine started to return. Now we have a whole medicine chest of possible intoxicants and combinations of intoxicants that

feed into the construction of the party, intensifying it, accelerating it, imbuing it with a psychedelic edge. Yet, it is the social model of the party which has, most often, given these intoxicants a framework within which they can be used and allowed the experiences they offer to be shared with others. If you then add the music, the dancing, the crowds and the aesthetics of the club space, on top of that intoxicatory intensification, you end up with a space that feels very different from other spaces in people's lives. You create a hyper-reality not in Eco's (1987) use of the term, to label certain external simulacrum, but rather an environment that is sensually and socially intense, but which is nevertheless still grounded in a recognisable social model that stresses the "all-in-here-together" nature of the party. That's why I included the above party, because in a far less intense form it still exhibited the social seeds from which a club night grows.

Strangers

In 1959 Erving Goffman described the party in these terms:

"So we find the euphoria function for a social occasion resides somewhere between little social difference and much social difference. A dissolution of some externally based social distance must be achieved, a penetration of ego boundaries, but not to an extent that renders the participants fearful, threatened, or self consciously concerned with what is happening socially. Too much potential loss and gain must be guarded against, as well as too little." (Goffman in Malbon 1999:160)

This model still holds true, but it must be amended to encompass the contemporary club space. In terms of clubbing you must add the sensual intensity of the space on top of the model offered by Goffman. The club space already feels radically different from non-club spaces and this sensual intensity plays a role in altering actual social relations within the space, both amongst groups of friends and amongst strangers. We are examining a space where punters are surrounded by strangers, yet the way they experience these strangers, in the club space, is very different from the way they experience strangers in other public spaces. Clubs make sense of strangers by altering punters' emotional experience of those strangers and this shift in emotional perspective and experience is exceptionally important. In statistical and demographic terms the crowd may not be a diverse "melting pot", though I have certainly seen clubs which fit this description particularly, within the Asian club scene. Nevertheless clubs are predominantly made up of unknown faces and this simple fact generates the experience of social difference alluded to by Goffman.

We are taught to be wary of strangers from a very early age; they are fraught with potential dangers, there are paedophiles, rapists, serial killers, thieves and conmen; they are the insane and dangerous demons of our social world. Yet this is the minority of people; the existence of whom deeply affects the way we encounter the majority. Within clubbing people's expectations are reversed; they expect strangers to be all right, to behave themselves; they are expected to be tolerant, chilled out, smiley and charming. This expectation alters the way clubbers approach and interact with one another, which plays a hugely important role in turning these expectations into actual social realities. The club space then expresses the social aspirations of clubbers, not in terms of what they want to be in the social world, but rather how they want that social world to feel at a deeply embodied and sensual level.

Strangers are sensual objects. Their presence plays a profound role in shaping the body of the city which, I will argue, clubbing exists in opposition to. This opposition is not thought out as an idea; it is embodied as a particular way of inhabiting space that, in itself, has become habituated as a form of bodily technique. In the intoxication chapter I examined the way ecstasy and other drugs could make people less fearful of the world around them, while stressing that this fearfulness was not an idea, but a form of embodied tension that they had got used to over time; they weren't scared or fearful people; they were simply people used to negotiating the social realm of the city. This is best illustrated by an informant's example:

"When I'm on the street, during the day, going somewhere, I'm always aware of the people around me, how close they are to me and if they start getting too close then my hand immediately goes to my purse to check it's safe. It's just something I've noticed myself doing; it's not that I'm really scared, although I do find walking around scary at night, but even during the day I'm wary of people's intentions towards me." (Female 41; 19 years experience.)

This informant noticed her hand going to her purse but the action was more of a reflex than a conscious decision: a bodily manifestation of her wariness. It was simply part of being in a city and seeing people through the eyes of that city. The intensity of the city, its bustle and hustle, is exciting; it infects the bodies of city dwellers with a particular state of tension, that is sometimes valued and sometimes despised. It's a love/hate experience. The city can get on top of you, but its potential for excitement can also balance these negative experiences out. It is a world of social emotional and sensual extremes that have become everyday and taken for granted forms of bodily practice.

One informant suggested that:

"I don't think human beings are designed by evolution to live in this type of city community, where you have to share your space with thousands of

people you don't know and there are points, like on the tube, where those people are all invading your body space. It's often very uncomfortable but it's part of city life you get used to. Whereas, in a club everyone seems to share a similar mind set, a similar goal or theme and it's a community simply because you've all chosen to share that for the night" (Female 32; 9 years experience.)

Following Damasio, I believe that this "similar mind set" arises out of a change in bodily practice, which shifts the proto-self of punters from being inhabited by the body of the city, to being inhabited by the body of the club. That change allows people to become part of the social realm of the party and relish that experience. The tube is a great example of the anti-club; it can certainly be uncomfortable, people avoid eye contact, they phase out and become as anonymous as possible, they rarely smile. People become objects in the city by which I mean they become things to be negotiated, rather than engaged with. For example take this illustration of everyday practice in the city that I put in my field diary:

"In the post-office with my girlfriend, who's buying a stamp, in front of her is an elderly woman whose having problems. She needs a sticky label for her parcel; the post-office has none and she asks the counter assistant to help her out. A queue has formed; the assistant is trying to attach a label to the parcel; he's having problems and the woman's efforts to help are hindering his actions. In under 2 minutes the queue is livid, the tension is palpable; they look at each other angry, shaking their heads, faces screwed up, tutting away. The assistant can sense this tension; he starts to rush, which means he makes mistakes and begins to get flustered. He is only trying to be helpful yet the queue is giving him daggers, as if this three minute experience is just too much to cope with, like every one of them has some major crisis to attend to and is being thwarted by a slightly confused old lady. As my girlfriend points out this is so London, in the little town her Mum lives in, which she has returned from the day previously, a post-office queue would have been experienced as an excuse for a chat, which is what had actually happened to her when she was down there. In London though it reveals the almost explosive tensions of city life. I certainly wasn't immune to it; I found myself getting angry at this minor delay and had to try and force myself to chill out. My own response made me certain that, had you asked these people, one at a time when they were away from the situation, if shop assistants should help the elderly or infirm they would've all said yes, because I would have, but that moral and social idea is not enough to challenge the actual embodied reaction to the event created by the bit of the city which lives inside you and orientates you in this world."

This example is not a one off event; I've witnessed and experienced similar sensations many times while living in London. Any sense of empathy is obliterated and the person becomes an anger producing object. In *"The Science of Emotion"* Randolph R Cornelius suggests that:

“Anger, for example, is a complex, social emotion as well as a basic emotion in that it arises when one person’s plans or progress toward a goal are interrupted by another person’s behaviour.” (Cornelius 1996:137)

However, my own goals on the day of this incident were diffuse; I wasn’t in a hurry; I had nowhere else to be; I’d just wandered to the shops, but even this apparently relaxed agenda didn’t stop me getting annoyed like the rest of the queue. The sheer weight of human numbers in the city reduces your experience of people, as people to be empathised with and enjoyed, to people as objects, things to be traversed, avoided or irritated by. The body of the city is a defensive body; it is not a welcoming body; it does not want to be approached by strangers and it sends out visual cues to that effect: minimal eye contact, rarely smiling, feigning disinterest, sometimes rude and abrupt, bristling with tension. A simple physical lexicon that has profound effects upon the way the city is experienced at a socio-sensual level.

In clubs you are allowed to enjoy strangers, to talk “bullshit” to them, to watch them, to share their pleasure and enthusiasm. As one informant suggested:

“Clubbing always feels like an incredibly sane reaction to city life, because city living can get on top of you; it can tilt you towards seeing people in the worst way and clubbing seems to change the balance; a lot of the time you get to see people at their best.” (Male 34; 16 years experience.)

Within a club crowd strangers become fellow pleasure seekers; they are part and parcel of the pleasures of clubbing. If you can’t change your perspective on them, from that of the outside world, you can’t club, because you will be constantly experiencing the club space from a position of social distance that precludes the sense of connection that clubbers want to experience to the space and the crowds. The various shifts in social practice, displayed in clubs, are in many ways incredibly simple alterations in social practice; yet it takes a radical shift in a person’s socio-sensual self to create them. This suggests that these perspectives are more than changes in outlook; they are deeply embodied states that must be undone and then remade in an alternative form through the practice of clubbing. As we shall see in clubs much of this city physicality changes and people stop being objects, because they display their emotional enjoyment of the event upon the surface of the flesh and this emotional display makes the process of empathising with and enjoying them much easier, than in other public spaces found in the city. However, this process unfolds over the course of a club night; the clubbing body must be remade; it must disentangle itself from the body of the city and signal its arrival through an altered physical and social demeanour, that then participates within the party.

Party Participation

On his 71st birthday I took my Dad out to a club: a heaving, sweaty, sound clash where I was going to be the M.C. Dad had no idea what to expect; I had no inkling of whether he was going to enjoy it or not and we'd told him that we'd take him home at any point if he wasn't having fun. At 3am he was still on the crowded dance floor, smiling away and grooving on down with my girlfriend, whom he had been chaperoning, while I dashed back and forth from the microphone to our table. Everyone was grinning at him; people would come up and give him a kiss or a hug; his head was steaming from the heat. It was a fabulous night and he partied like a pro, dancing away, chatting to people, saying he was: "In seventh heaven." and "On cloud 9."

My Dad had no previous experience of the contemporary club environment, yet his own mental model of "how to behave at a party", that had been created in seemingly very different spaces, still allowed him to negotiate and enjoy the club experience, but it was his willingness to put that party model into action, to participate, that made the real difference. As one informant suggested:

"People have to participate in the clubs and the crowds, participate and lend something of themselves to the social situation and the ones that do, well more often than not, they're the people who would lend themselves to any social situation, be it their Dad's re-marriage, Granny's birthday or whatever. They're the best ones; the ones you really want in a club, but I think you have to remember that there are always people who participate and there will always be people who are passengers." (Male 27; 10 years experience.)

My Dad summed it up when we were talking to him after our night out. He admitted that he had been a bit worried about going and he hadn't been sure what he was letting himself in for, but he had decided to go because, "It would be an experience" and that whatever happened he had already decided, "He'd stay until the end and make the best of it" and that's exactly what he did. Any opportunity to dance and he danced. If people came up to him he would smile and chat to them immediately. When he got a bit tired he'd just sit down, have a natter or simply watch the mayhem with a huge smile on his face, until he was ready to get into the groove again. When the scantily clad girls came up to give him a kiss he'd pucker up with glee. He refused nothing and seized everything and with only two glasses of whiskey inside him he was certainly the soberest person at this party. As a fellow party goer commented to me:

“Is he your Dad?”

“Yes.”

“WOW I hope I can party like that when I’m his age; he’s wild.”

“Yes, he taught me every important thing I know.”

The desire to participate and enjoy the night is the bedrock upon which the party state of mind is built. No one sets out to a club with the intention of having a “shit” time. Yet there are barriers to the level of participation people can achieve. The sensual intensity of the club space is a seductive force that helps overcome these barriers and turns that intention into an embodied actuality. As my next informant suggests:

“People seem to think that they can buy a good night out; they expect to have it handed to them on a plate, just because they forked out £20 to get through the door and they’re paying way over the odds for their drinks, they think that they should be having a good time, because they’re spending money, but that’s not the way it works; you’ve got to get it on in a club; you’ve got to make it succeed and if there isn’t enough people pumping it out then clubs just fall on their arses.” (Male 26; 8 years experience.)

Consumption must become production if a party is going to “take-off”, because parties must be re-built each night from the feet up. Punters must occupy them physically and sensually and this process of sensual occupation gradually alters Damasio’s proto-self, that map of body in mind, and so changes people’s conscious perspective upon the crowds, the space and their own relationship to it. Many clubbers presume that it is the intoxicants that make the party and they undoubtedly have an important role to play. As my next informant points out:

“The way I experience ecstasy has definitely changed over time; I learnt to control it much more, which meant that it was never really the same, even after a couple of goes. It’s still really enjoyable just not as intense. Occasionally you get a strong hit and people say ‘Oh these are amazing Es’, but it has far more to do with the mood you’re in, in the first place. Certainly E can change your mood, but if there’s stuff going on then it’s not going to suddenly get rid of that. So if you’re in a really good mood and happy and content and you’re gagging for a party then it’s just an amazing rush, but if you’re tired, or ratty, or anxious, or you didn’t really want to go out, then those feelings leak through into the experience and they can affect your ability to make the most of the night. So I would say that, if you’re counting on the drugs to ensure a good night then you’re on shaky ground; it has to come from you in the end, but if you’re in the mood then drugs makes the whole thing easier to get into and even more intense.” (Female 39; 9 years experience.)

But intoxication is not enough on its own to guarantee participation. Intoxicants shift the body and minds of punters, but if the insecurities and niggles of the outside world are too

strong they hold people back from participating in the event by remaining a constant point of emotional reference, which stops people shifting their socio-sensual posture within the space. This inhibits a sense of connection to the party, which can make punters feel even more miserable and excluded. Some punters tend to blame everything, but themselves, if they cannot connect to the space. The drugs, the crowd, the music, the club are all held responsible for a person's inability to participate in the party, sometimes this is the case, at other times punters have simply arrived carrying the emotional burden of the outside world and they just can't adjust to the space.

What you add to the space, the level to which you participate and how you participate is the thing that will really get you noticed in a club. As one informant put it:

“When you start getting recognised for your party talents then that's the best bit. Suddenly you're getting invited out to nights because people know you can do it; you'll be an asset and make a fucking effort. They know that you'll go off and party regardless of the rest of the crowd. If someone puts me on their guest list then they know they're going to get a player. It's free, so I make an effort: I dress up, I'll shave, pluck me eyebrows, shave my head, wear something wild and funky. I'll make an effort to look good and I don't mind doing that at all, because it's fair, it's a trade off. That's all surface stuff though, window dressing if you like, the most important thing you can do is help create a good atmosphere. If you're all tarted up but you're giving people attitude then that's bollocks. I like to think I bring any attitude down, because I won't let it wind me up or pander to it; I just party hard and I try and encourage other people to do the same.” (Male 26; 8 years experience.)

Having seen this guy in action I can confirm that he was indeed a party asset and excellent illustration of the fact that the party arises from people's desire to participate. In a club the desire to be amongst others, to share time and space with those others, is one of the major allures of the event. Nobody is forced to be there, there is no obligation to club from outside of your own social circle, and by choosing to club people decide to place themselves within a crowd. In one form or another they can either participate in that crowd or they can be “passengers”, who expect the party to provide them with more than they're prepared to give it. In terms of participation the most important element arises from carrying the *jouissance* of the party on the surface of the flesh; the party must be revealed; it cannot afford to be too “cool”, but must instead be hot, passionate and flirtatious. It must drip from people's bodies and connect those bodies together.

What Clubbers Want

Courtesy

In the main club nights are incredibly courteous which is demonstrated in the way in which the crowd interact with one another when something goes wrong. Whether squeezing past one another, bumping into one another, colliding on the dancefloor or simply catching each other's eye, people respond differently to one another in the club space than when outside of that space. This is a fairly startling difference, as the next informant, who had not lived in this country for over 16 years and who I took to a club while he was here on holiday, said:

"It's so different from how clubs used to be, I couldn't get over it, it was far friendlier and everyone was so polite and laid back. When I slammed into that guy on the dancefloor, I mean I really collided with him, he just shrugged it off with a grin, that would have been a fight when I used to club here, no doubt about it; this scene is much better I had a really good time."
(Male 45)

The club is a social swirl, it is grounded in the movement of people and bodies, and that kinetic pulse manifests itself as an intrinsic part of the party's sociality. The message that you must be able to read from the club crowd is very simple it is, "We're here, we're happy, we're having a time." The core sociality of the party is grounded in pre-formed social groupings made up of your mates and acquaintances. They will provide the central social network and a deeper level of social interaction outside of which lies a room full of strangers, but for a party to work these groups must communicate across their own boundaries, even if that level of communication is fairly superficial. In fact superficial is probably the wrong word, because it is so negatively loaded. In the club sense this surface level communication is incredibly important, because it underpins the shared nature of the event. A better word would be super-facial because social interaction arises out of the highly animated bodies and expressive faces of the club crowd, whose visible and corporeal enthusiasm rises to the surface of their flesh.

Courtesy provides the framework within which this stranger based communication can operate, without it pulling punters away from the kinaesthetic rush of the party itself. Conversation between strangers, except when they're chatting each other up, tends to be brief and shouted, because of the noise there is little room for subtlety in people's way of speaking and to combat this effect the communicative qualities of the body comes to the fore. In club terms the way you say something, the physical stance that you say it from, is as important as the words themselves. The most important thing to communicate is your sense of being-in-the-party. Often the words you use are pure blarney; they are simply an excuse

to share a particular emotional charge with the world, which indicates that you and the person you're speaking to are part of something passionate, joyous and in social terms quite special. As one promoter said in relation to his own club nights:

"I think another way I'd try to describe a night club is that they are the most excessively polite places you can ever go. People say please and thank-you all the time. That's why we call ourselves 'Thankyou', because people are so polite and shit nights are the ones where people aren't polite, whether for reasons of snobbery or attitude, but when you get into a truly great night where there is no attitude, there is not only no attitude but there's a desire to banish the idea of attitude completely and be really nice to everyone, because they all deserve it and you make sure everyone's all right." (Male 32; 14 years experience.)

Attitude

I have placed this section here because it illustrates the opposite of courtesy. The term attitude is most commonly used negatively; in its most basic form attitude simply means three things: hassling people, behaving violently, not showing any respect towards other clubbers. In its extended form it is used to denote spaces which either refused people entry, or made them feel uncomfortable once they were inside. Clubs that have dress codes or other door restrictions are seen by some clubbers as having attitude, as are clubs which are un-welcoming and unfriendly. Clubs which seem more interested in making money, than looking after their punters, will also be seen as having attitude. Attitude is basically anything that arises within the club which constrains people's ability to seize the event.

Clubs have social hierarchies; they are not completely egalitarian spaces in which everyone is equal, a subject we have already touched upon when looking at core crowds. As one informant pointed out:

"There's a pecking order in clubs that's most noticeable on the guest list, who gets in free, who gets in cheap, who has to pay full price; they're all ways of ensuring you get the right crowd in who'll set the right tone. All clubbers know this; they've seen it in action on the door, but I think attitude arises when that hierarchy can't get over itself, when it treats other clubbers with disdain, just because they're not part of that core social group that gives a club its identity, then you get attitude. I think people accept there's a hierarchy; they just don't want their faces rubbed in it once they're actually in the club, because they don't want to feel excluded." (Male 33; 17 years experience.)

Hierarchy doesn't disappear in clubs it just becomes less important, because if it becomes the focus of the night the vibe will remain muted and hostile, which is not the experience

people desire from the club space, even those who are part of the club's core crowd. However, attitude also arises from personal insecurity on the part of some clubbers. Clubs have their banter and their bouts of bitchiness and some people just can't cope with them; they immediately get defensive or upset, yet even club bitching can be funny; it is something you learn to deal with as you become more familiar with the club space. The overall vibe of the space puts such bitchiness into a different context from other spaces; it is seen as a glitch in the sociality of the night and clubbers treat it as such. So on one occasion I saw a woman dealing with some club bitchiness simply by pointing out that:

“Your friends can think what they want about me but they can't insult me, because I'm here to have a good time and nothing else really matters to me at this particular moment in time.”

She went on to have an exceptionally good time while the boys who'd been trying to drop snide little comments left early. She defended her right to party and be left alone to party, she was in the right, the club space put her in the right because clubbers see attitude as being part of the everyday world, rather than part of the club space. As one informant pointed out:

“Clubs are supposed to be special; they have their own rules and when I see someone breaking those rules, in a club, I judge them far more harshly than I would outside of a club, where you expect it more.” (Male 31; 14 years experience.)

One of the biggest causes of attitude in a club space is linked to the classificatory codes which arose from the musical, stylistic and identificatory labels that Sarah Thornton recognised and recounted in her work. The classificatory schema surrounding notions of sub-cultural capital can skew clubbers' perspectives upon the event. If they are constantly trying to classify the event, and to assess other people through those classifications, then they will never get round to just casting them all aside and participating in that event. In the last instance how you club is far more important than what you know about clubbing. I've met clubbers who wouldn't know a turntable from a pork chop, but it didn't stop them partying big style and getting themselves onto guest-lists all over London. Whereas you can pick up most of what Thornton defines as “sub-cultural capital” from reading club magazines, listening to the pirate stations and scanning the internet without ever learning how to really party. So “sub-cultural capital” is often the very basis of attitude in clubs; it is used to create distance and generate difference to the point where it fragments the club. I would argue that the more you're worrying about “sub-cultural capital”, “coolness” or “hipness”, while clubbing, the less you're actually participating in the party. Thornton

seems to be focusing more on the forms of knowledge, through which you choose a night, rather than the knowledge you will need to enjoy those nights.

More Smiles per Square foot.

The instant indicator that you're at a top night is the percentage of people who are smiling and clubs score mighty high up on the smileometer. The smile is the basic communicative currency of clubbing; in many cases sharing a smile with someone is the only communication that you'll have with them all night. It's interesting to note that in neuro-cognitive terms the actual physical act of smiling leads to the release of endorphins and a general lightening of your mood, regardless of your emotional state at the time, as shown by Ekman 1993. It both helps construct and communicate a particular social buzz that is itself infectious. Like a yawn a smile can unleash a mimetic physical response, a synching of emotional perspective that tells you all you need to know about another's state of self. Smiling is also one of the few true universals even if the thing that elicits that smile is a cultural construction.

In terms of the party, smiling plays two roles: it is an act of communication and it is also the actuality of being in the club space; it's why you're there, to experience the smile that rises deep from within your guts and explodes across your face. I have returned from clubs with my face aching from grinning for so long and this state wasn't necessarily drug induced; it arose from the social world that unfolds before you across the course of the club event. The deep voyeuristic pleasure of watching people seizing and wallowing in the frenzied sensual excess of the club environment: seeing bodies loosen and writhe, witnessing the bursts of laughter, the gentleness of touch, the moments of surging madness, that liberates the space and takes the club crowd "further", to borrow Ken Keesey's use of the word from the famed Magic Bus. All these moments are grounded in the human warmth of the smile, that lets you know that what you're doing is OK, that you are being granted freedom by those around you and that all they want in return is a bit of respect for their own party shenanigans. People freeing people by granting a sense of informal social consent.

There are no guarantees attached to club tickets which ensure this and the party will not always enter the building, what I am describing here is a core sociality that I witnessed repeatedly over the course of my fieldwork. It certainly wasn't contained in any particular style of club venue; no specific group had a monopoly over it. It could arise for a time and then evaporate; it wasn't always shared by all clubbers at all times; it could flicker across

pockets of people or infiltrate the entire space; very occasionally it wouldn't arise at all and everyone would leave feeling let down. However, when it did hit it would taste like utopia, not a permanent flavour just a lollipop sweetness that had to be re-licked over and over again. An experiential reality that could, for a short time, re-enchant a socially jaded world.

As an informant said:

"It's a place where you can smile at people without fear and that's great. Before I went clubbing I was very scared of smiling at people, in the street, in case they got the wrong idea and thought there was something, another message, than just simply smiling at someone. Then you go clubbing and everyone's just grinning and smiling at you and you can smile back and that's it, you're just smiling at each other for the pleasure of smiling. Then for me I noticed that I was just smiling more at people in general, outside of clubs, and they would more often than not smile back at me and it's such a nice experience to get this great big grin back, when you're in the middle of this grey city walking to work through the rain, it completely changes how you feel; I definitely learnt that from clubbing. Yes it's harder to do outside clubs, because you're sometimes not quite sure of the reaction, but I try and make myself do it because when you do get a response it's lovely." (Female 41; 19 years experience.)

The smile, and the friendliness it communicates, is absolutely essential in creating the club vibe. The desire to pull people into the space and to have them feel at ease while there may not, however, be a clubbing universal, because some clubs obviously fail in this elementary task. Take this informant's example of a bad club:

"In terms of the club environment the best thing about it is the lack of social pressure, nobody's expecting you to be anything other than a party animal. The clubs where you're expected to be something are the ones that have a strong image of themselves, they think they're so different and alternative. This is a perfect extension of the club ego gone wrong. One of the venues I used to go to went really wobbly over the last few months. Now it has an exclusive clientele in the worst sense of the word. For months they started enforcing an extremely dodgy dress code, that they have only just started dropping, in a desperate attempt to try and entice a happy smiley crowd back in, but I think it's too late. The DJs are diabolical. One time they played progressive dancy tunes. People would dance. There were no limits and that's what counted. Now it's all about how you look and the music is darkwave goth stuff, which is fine in blasts but not all night, because it's shite to dance to. I know the dealers there, nobody takes speed there anymore they take pills, but they're listening to music which is wholly un-pill orientated. It's whiny and depressing and because they're all pillled up they get really mopey like a bunch of adolescents with acne; no-one smiles and that immediately lets you know something's wrong with the night. When they do dance they dance in little cliquey circles and they won't split them, so other people can join in, so you get this really arsey dancefloor. that's an absolute bastardisation of everything a dancefloor should be. It's sad because it used to be a laugh" (Male 26; 8 years experience.)

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My fieldwork didn't take me to any venues that resembled this place, maybe I was lucky, but I don't think so, because my informants described the vast majority of clubs, that they had attended, in positive terms and the majority of those informants had been clubbing for years. The importance of the smile was demonstrated in all the different types of club I visited; it was essential for the creation of the club vibe. Without the smile there could be no process of seduction and clubs must be seductive; they must draw people in and take them to a point where they can seize the night.

Tolerance

Most clubbers see clubs as spaces of heightened tolerance, but in reality there are limits to what different styles of clubs will tolerate. In every case the least tolerable type of behaviour in clubs is violence, this was unacceptable in all the club spaces I visited, but more than that it was viewed with a sense of disgust that clubbers didn't always experience in other environments. Take this example from one of my informants:

“Violence in clubs, it's pathetic isn't it? It's not very common though, I mean I've been clubbing for what 8-9 years and I've only seen one real fight in a club; it made me feel sick. I've seen fights in pubs quite a few times and you just think, 'Oh shit here we go again'. You expect it more in a pub or even when you see people fighting on the street it's always nasty and horrible but it's not such a shock, but seeing it in a club that was a shock; it's like: what the hell are you playing at? You're in a club you idiots, people don't fight here” (Female 32; 9 years experience.)

The lack of violence in clubs, when compared to other big social events, is an absolutely critical part of the club experience because it stops the crowd being scared of one another at a physical level. You may encounter a bit of club bitching, or come across some “attitude” from other clubbers, which can adversely affect your night, but people don't expect this to lead to a fight. This was true in the clubs I visited. In general clubbers had rejected violence; they didn't want to be part of it and they didn't respect it. One informant summed it up in these terms:

“As a man you're trained up like a fucking dog to have this relationship towards violence, it's always represented as the ultimate male thing, you're taught to respect it, because it's a sign of strength, you've got Arnie and Brucie and Sly and now Vinnie Jones for gods sake and you're supposed to think, 'Oh I wish I was that tough, I wish I was that strong' but I've stopped seeing it as strength, now I see it as a weakness, because I've spent hundreds of nights out with gentle fucking people that don't want to hassle anyone;

they just want to live and enjoy living and it's changed my entire attitude to violence. I just find it pathetic. Human beings were meant to be more than cruel, vicious, shits and if we can't be, then we're just bald monkeys with no fucking future." (Male 34; 17 years experience.)

Violence wasn't tolerated in any of the clubs I visited or any of the clubs my informants talked about; they were all in agreement on that point. This absence of violence or even the expectation that violence may occur, underpinned the social changes that occur in the club space.

Other types of behaviour that would be tolerated in clubs largely depended upon the style of club you were in. Some of the most tolerant spaces in clubland, though, had to be the fetish clubs, where people could do what they liked to one another, as long as everything was consensual and as we have seen people valued the sense of freedom that they granted. This stress on open and honest consent created a social space in which people could cut through some of the complexities of social interaction, because the right to ask and the right to refuse provided the boundaries within which communication took place.

Informality: The Script of the Party

"You could have a long conversation in the toilets with a woman who tells you that she's taken two Es, just been jilted by her boyfriend and is sleeping with his best friend for revenge, but ask her what she does for a living and she may well stop in mid-sentence at this insulting breach in etiquette. It is rude to puncture the bubble of an institution where fantasies of identity are a key pleasure." (Thornton. 1995:91)

Whether the above quote reveals a breach in someone's 'fantasy of identity' or is simply a description of a punter's response to a particularly banal question, is a contentious point. Club identities aren't fantasies; they are just connected more to the party, than the outside world, and they are as real, if not more real, than anything punters create in that outside world. Club conversations can be seen as alternative scripts; a concept defined by Bradd Shore in these terms:

"Scripts are standardized conversation templates for organizing interactions in well-defined goal-orientated situations.... Scripts are really ritualized conversations and are pervasive in discourse." (Shore 1996:57)

The "goal" of a club conversation is often little more than to, "communicate for the sheer joy of communicating". Thornton simply went off script and classed her informant's reticence as an indication of a fantasised identity. Her informant may well have been

spinning a tale, but tale spinning, bull-shitting and talking blarney are all part of the accepted clubbing script, because the sensual act of communicating is more important than what is actually said. Most clubbers don't go out partying so that they can spend all night talking about work, to the extent that the work conversation is seen as rather dull; if your work is all you've got to talk about in a club then you can be viewed as rather one dimensional. Clubbers discuss their leisure activities more than they discuss work; they talk about enjoying the party, not enjoying the party, the people, other clubs, drugs, music and only later on, if the interaction continues long enough, which many don't, will people mention work. As an informant suggested:

"In a good club people don't really judge each other in terms of the life they lead outside the club. You judge people on how they club, whether they can rock a night or whether they just stand around looking like a prune that's the important thing." (Female 29; 13 years experience.)

The social hierarchies, that exist outside of the club space and within its walls, do not disappear completely, but they are relaxed once you've past through the doors of the space; they become fluid because they are no longer the central reference point in people's conversations; they are replaced in that function by the immediacy of the party.

In a club you are predominantly amongst strangers and so, as an informant explained:

"Everything's really straight forward in a club there aren't long consequences about things, even if you misconstrue someone in a club you're probably not going to see them again; it's not on-going; it's not going to affect your chances for promotion; it's not going to get back to someone so all your mates hate you. It's there; it happened; you didn't intend it to happen; you weren't trying to be rude, but in a club you just shrug it off and get back into the party and you hope the other person does the same. You are, after all, just two strangers; you didn't have any history up to that point you're not going to have any after, so it seems stupid to get upset" (Male 32; 14 years experience.)

The anonymity of the club space reduces the lines of communication that flow out from the party to other aspects of your life. Certainly gossip can pass between club crowds, but it's not going to get back to your boss, your parents or your colleagues and that grants a sense of heightened social freedom. The woman in Thornton's quote was utilising that freedom, she could happily tell a stranger intimate details of her life safe in the knowledge that this stranger wouldn't spill the beans. This is an important point, this sense of anonymity and intimacy, a revealing of the self to an extent that is usually reserved for the therapists couch, an expectation that these people will listen without judging you because they have ceased, at

an emotional level, to feel like strangers; they have instead become co-conspirators for a brief part of the night.

The important point to remember then is that the rules of clubbing exist outside of the club space; they are grounded in a particular social model of how to behave at a party, which are then intensified by the social, aesthetic and intoxicatory nature of the club event. This social model is aspirational in its content; it is the model of how people should behave on an informal basis when they leave the social hierarchies of the everyday world outside of the space. Obviously, parties don't always succeed in this task but because clubs, as the contemporary home of the party, offer a whole different set of participatory modes, dancing, smiling, chatting and watching, the party itself provides the bulk of what is spoken about amongst strangers over the course of the night, which means the amount of baggage you have to bring in from the outside world, in order to engage with the event, is radically reduced. The most asked question in clubland is not, "Where do you work?" but rather, "Are you having a good time?"

Adventure

"I ended up naked and tied to a bed covered in Gladioli having my ass whipped by a women I'd never met before. I hadn't set out with the intention of this happening, but at the time it felt like the right thing to do and in retrospect it was definitely the right thing to do. Some clubs have that adventurous feel, like anything could happen and that's important to me. I want adventures and I'm open to them. You don't have to go to the Amazon to get them; you just have to get amongst adventurous people."
(Male 34; 17 years experience.)

Clubbing is an adventure and this sense of adventure is important because it provides the impetus to explore club land, to try new venues and meet new crowds. These adventures are sensual realities that can allow people to move beyond the bodily and classificatory constraints of the everyday world but unlike Malbon who suggests that:

"rather than resisting notions of power which are acting upon them, individuals may actually be 'resisting' other facets of *their own* identities."(Malbon 1999: 151)

I see them as a way of expanding those identities and turning your dreams and aspirations into social realities. Rather than resisting other aspects of people's lives they make sense of them. So in relation to work they become a reason for working, rather than the opposite of work. They validate work because that work provides the funding for these adventures, as

well as a point of sensual alterity which actually intensifies the club experience by providing a sensual counterpoint to those experiences. The realm of clubs offers people the opportunity to explore their desires and uncover new aspects of their own selves, by turning those often vague and rather disembodied desires into embodied experiences that occur in socially supportive spaces. People are pushing their own envelope, expanding upon the socio-sensual experience of occupying their own worlds and inscribing the knowledge of excitement and passion into their memories by moving beyond the constraints of their own self-consciousness and the restraints of the everyday “gaze”.

Meeting people in the Club Space.

“It’s similar emotionally to being in a football crowd. It’s the same crowd psychology thing, when you’re part of one body of people screaming goal, or whatever, you feel great because you’re connected to those other people. It feels like that, it’s that intense but there’s no enemy, no losers, we’re going yes to ourselves and each other, not because our teams beaten another team. We’re going ‘YES WE ARE US AND YES WE’RE TOGETHER’, it’s a non aggressive yesness. I think the essence of truly great clubbing is everyone scores a goal and nobody loses.” (Male 32; 14 years experience.)

As we I have shown, club crowds are predominantly made up of pre-formed social groups, who must then allow the boundaries of those groups to become permeable if the club, as a whole, is going to create the requisite social vibe and reach the sort of social peak that my informant describes above. This process doesn’t happen all at once it must build incrementally over the course of the night, but as a number of informants pointed out the average club night is fairly long in relation to other shared leisure experiences.

“Clubbing is a relatively long period of time to be with this many people. You go to a cinema, or football match it’s 90 minutes in the main crowd part of the experience, most other forms of entertainment seem to be about 1.5 to 2 hours long, but night-clubs go on all night and you’re not the same person; you don’t behave the same way all night; you don’t usually go there and do 6 to 7 hours of exactly the same thing. So there are points in the night when, even though you know there’s great music going on, you might be resting and chatting at the bar, or whatever, and then you have those bits which are the peak of the dancing, say between 2-3 o’clock and you’re on the floor and you might lose it to the music, but that usually lasts about 5 minutes, and the rest of the time you’ll be dancing with people or going for a wander, chatting to your mates, watching, disco-napping, meeting new people, trying to score, attempting to get laid, whatever. It’s all part of clubbing which is really a range of things that all go in to creating the whole night’s experience.” (Male 32; 14 years experience.)

The sheer length of time that you remain in the club space means that you have time to relax into it and gradually become part of the crowd. Groups often stay together for the first hour or so, while they settle in before beginning to explore the space, especially in larger venues, while in smaller clubs you are thrown into an instant proxemic relationship with everybody else. There are many ways of interacting in the club space though and you can give something to the space without actually speaking to other people. I have seen groups who have stayed together all night, not really communicating across their boundaries in terms of talking, but nevertheless exhibiting their enjoyment and enthusiasm for the space to such a high degree that their actions are infectious to other punters. In this case they are displaying their allegiance to the party by dancing, laughing, smiling and generally having a time. Again this illustrates the importance of the smile because, even though a group may be concentrating on one another, as long as they don't forget to smile at the other punters they can contribute to the vibe of the party. Conversation is not the only form of communication that can gel a crowded room of clubbers into a party mass.

Arriving with a group also provided punters with an extra level of security; a social base that they can leave behind when they want to go off and explore and have an adventure safe in the knowledge that they can run back to their friends if it all goes pear shaped. They can chat and dance with strangers, flirt with people, check out the different rooms and music.

When groups do begin to splinter and meet other people it tends to happen gradually. As one informant put it:

“My experience of what normally happens is that you meet someone, you're chatting to them at the bar, then one of your friends walks past and you say 'Come and speak to this person they're lovely', and then they either become part of your group of mates, for the night, and you grab in several people or else the opposite happens and two groups just collide and get on with it. It's about extending the boundaries of who are friends and who are strangers and the difference between the two of them. People you've never met before become people you'd treat as though they were at a wedding and you vaguely knew them and you can have safe eye contact with them and then you get your best mates for ever the 'I love you friends', who are usually the ones you came with. Everything gets pushed out so that as your personal space collapses, your public space gets bigger.” (Male 32; 14 years experience.)

This quote makes a couple of points; it stresses the difference in intensity between the “I love you friends” and the rest of the crowd and the wedding metaphor captures the social vibe particularly well; it is a far more pragmatic and real version of the “Peace, Love, Unity, Respect” ideology articulated by some younger ecstasy orientated clubbers and places it into

a social perspective, that can escape the confines of the ecstasy gig. Crowds who haven't taken ecstasy can still create this informal "wedding" vibe, because it is grounded in the idea of mutual celebration, rather than a being associated with a specific drug rush.

A lot of these meetings occur away from the noise of the main dancefloor, at bars, in chill-out rooms, the toilets, in corridors anywhere people don't have to bellow at the top of their voices to be heard. An informant told me that:

"I've met a lot of people in the loo or the queue for the loo, in fact, this is going to sound so sad but what the hell, I've actually ended up queuing for the loo just because I fancied a chat. Sometimes I'll end up sharing make up and I've met loads of people in the loo and some of them have gone on to become really good friends. I don't think men do that sort of thing in the loo. Do they? It's more of a woman thing but it's really social." (Female 32; 9 years experience.)

Men don't spend a great deal of time talking to each other in the toilet; it happens occasionally, but it's not a major part of taking a piss; it's certainly not something that's worth queuing for.

The social interaction that make up this crowd sociality range from brief moments of silly banter to longer periods of getting to know people, how much those interactions can expand, beyond the space of the club, depends upon the depth of connection people make with one another. One informant described his social experience of clubbing in these terms:

"Once you come out of school or college then most the people you know probably come from those days; you hang out with people you know, people who you work with, the body of friends you grew up with throughout your life. Then you can go to a great night-club and you're suddenly friends with loads and loads of people you've never met before, just because you saw someone over a couple of weeks in the same club and you got chatting to them. A lot of the time you just have really great, silly conversations with strangers and that's it, but sometimes it goes beyond that. You make key connections and you find your social group has massively expanded because you got to know one person well enough in a club that they've introduced you to their friends." (Male 32; 14 years experience.)

This informant stresses the way that clubs offer the opportunity to expand your social network beyond the people that you grew up around or went to school with. Clubs are points of collection that attract people from across the city and sometimes beyond; they are de-territorial zones in that they expand upon the sociality of the local and the biographical, so that you get to meet people who you wouldn't normally come across.

The second point is held in the phrase "key connections", because people tend to club in groups, a meeting between two individuals, in each group, can initiate a much larger set of

social connections. The vast majority of social interactions in the club space will not be classed as “key connections”, but because we are talking about groups, rather than individuals, you don’t actually have to make that many “key connections” in order to radically alter the nature of your social network. A group of friends can club for months and just have a series of brief, funny and enjoyable social encounters, that remain completely unconnected to one another, but once they’ve been around for a while, and been seen around, then they increase the likelihood of making such a key connection, which can shift them into a larger set of interconnected social scenes, that can expand beyond the club space and out into their everyday world.

You only have to look at the rise in phone chat lines, dating agencies and lonely hearts columns to realise how lonely people can become in the city and how difficult it can be to meet people from outside of your immediate experience of worklife, homelife and the social network held within your biography. As one informant explained:

“I work in a small team predominantly consisting of women and I don’t know how I would’ve met people otherwise. I was really lucky to meet somebody, who I worked with, that took me clubbing and opened up a whole new world. I’ve never met anybody in a pub. Don’t go there to meet people you go with friends and I don’t know how people meet other people in London. I knew one person when I arrived here. It’s an entry into another world. I’ve never been to one club regularly but I still meet the same people over and over again and you get to know them. Every guy I’ve dated I met while clubbing and I’ve also met them afterwards in clubs and bumped into people who I haven’t seen for ages, so for me it provided a social life.” (Female 32; 9 years experience.)

Even when you don’t meet anyone to talk to in a club, even when you spend the night just dancing, watching, listening and just being in the vibe then the communicative physicality of clubbing, the phatic synching of emotional and social states, still provides an intense social experience that draws people in and makes them part of the party. It provides an experience that is social, sensual and participatory, a combination that offers some level of social immersion, even if it doesn’t always offer conversation and the long term friendships that my informants have experienced.

Club crowds get to recognise each other just by sharing space or a particular club scene with one another; they begin to meet in other venues and at other nights; they become part of a diffuse social network that is grounded in the knowledge that they have shared good times with each other. This is an informal process based in having seen each other party, but as one informant suggested:

“There’s something special about watching people enjoy themselves; it’s like you get to see them at their best; they’re not being shitty to each other; they’re just having their time and letting everyone else get on with it and when you do see somebody behaving like a twat in a club you see them at their very worst, because if they’re one of the wankers who can’t hack it in a club then what the fuck are they going to be like outside of a club.” (Male 31; 17 years experience.)

On a personal note I came across some people, over and over again while clubbing, and although I can’t claim to have got to know all of them well, or that they have become close friends, I saw enough of them to make me glad that they are out there doing their thing, living their lives, having their times, creating their worlds, without seeming to screw anyone else over in the process. I am not trying to claim that clubs are some sort of perfect social world, there are always some people in any given club who can be rude, arrogant, mean-spirited and bitchy, but if they are not experienced as a minority then the club cannot happen, because the space will become socially toxic. I am simply pointing out that my own clubbing experiences and those of my informants have in the main been positive, on both a social and personal level, so the only conclusion I can draw is that clubs, in their various guises, grant more positive social experiences than negative ones, even if they will never be perfect.

The Seductive Gaze.

The theoretical framework that best explains the sociality of clubbing arises from Foucault’s notion of the gaze. I have referenced this gaze at a number of points throughout this work, but in this section I want to explore it in greater detail in relation to the social changes that occur within the club space. The most concise definition of the gaze, that I have come across, was given by Chris Rojek in his book *“Decentering Leisure”*:

“The basic idea is that our behaviour is regulated by the gaze of others and by the gaze of our own self-reflection. The eye controls order so that, at a glance, we can determine what the appropriate ways of behaving are for a given situation.” (Rojek 1995:61)

Foucault theorised the gaze as a force of surveillance and control. However, I would argue that, in the club space, the gaze gradually alters over the course of the night to become a liberating force. When Foucault speaks of the gaze he views it as a disembodied force, almost like a surveillance camera, but human vision is intimately linked to the emotional and embodied state of the human being who both gazes and is gazed at. The body of the clubber

is both an expressive medium and subject to the gaze of others, at times clubbers want to be looked at, they want to be seen. When the gaze is experienced in clubs, however, it is changed by the social rules of the club space in comparison to other public spaces, because it is given and experienced from within an altered social and emotional framework. Take this example from one of my informants:

“I love to go to clubs because you can watch people and be watched. If you’re in the street or a pub or something it’s harder to look at people, in case they catch your eye or get the wrong idea, and when people look at you, especially when they’re not smiling, that can feel quite threatening or make you feel a bit anxious, but in a club you can just watch people having a really good time and they can see you having fun and it never feels threatening.” (Female 29; 10 years experience.)

This adds another dimension to Foucault’s controlling gaze; in the public spaces of the city the gaze of others is avoided because it can be sensed as threatening, an invasion of a person’s anonymity as they negotiate this social realm. The simple act of catching someone’s eye brings about an unwanted connection to the world of strangers. The gaze of the city is not only controlling, it also makes people visible; it singles them out and penetrates the studied invisibility people attempt to maintain on the street, especially when they move beyond their everyday routines and locales. Even those who deliberately stand out in crowds feel this gaze, they’ve just had more practice in dealing with it, and the very fact they stand out can offer them some protection; people are suspicious of difference but they also find it unnerving, the ‘freakier’ you look the more unnerved people become. As my informant points out this sense of becoming visible can be uncomfortable and threatening and she enjoys the freedom to watch and be watched in clubs. She becomes not only the object of the gaze, but also a gazer and this sense of reversal is important to her and clubbing as a whole, because it allows her to connect with, rather than distance herself from, the club crowd.

The social nature of the club space changes the gaze by altering the way it is experienced; the gaze of the other becomes a seductive rather than an oppressive force, that connects people by allowing them to share one another’s pleasure. The process of becoming visible ceases to be threatening; it can be savoured as part of the club experience; it is encouraged and celebrated.

The club gaze is not the disembodied surveillance of Foucault; it is an emotive force, because it arises from within the radically altered emotional vibe of the club space, that has

its own sensual parameters and moral rules, that are very different from those which occur beyond its walls. The mechanism identified by Foucault still operates, but the gaze becomes seductive and subversive; it encourages the adoption and embodiment of the rules and behaviours of the club space in opposition to the rules and behaviours enforced and embodied in other public spaces.

An informant summed up clubbing experiences in these terms:

“It’s the freedom from having to think about how what you’re doing is effecting other people, that’s a great freedom; you can dance really badly; you know in the cold light of day that you’ve looked really ugly in clubs, big eyes, gurning, looking stupid, but it’s OK.” (Male 32; 14 years experience.)

This sense of being less self conscious is important in relation to the notion of the gaze, because it reduces the force of self reflection that provides the pathway via which the gaze becomes embodied. The club gaze rests upon surfaces; it cannot penetrate individuals or groups who, because of intoxication or their own exuberant participation in the activities of clubbing, have become less self conscious about how they would look through the eyes of the everyday world. They expect to be judged by the rules of the club. When the gaze is experienced in a positive way, when the environment, that it arises from and is embedded in, allows seeing and being seen to be enjoyed and relished, then it underpins a slippage in the social rules and formalities that exist in the everyday world. The gaze becomes conspiratorial and reassuring. One informant who loved to dress up big style explained the difference like this:

“I used to get dressed up and then get the tube and you’d feel people looking at you and occasionally they’d shout things out, you know insulting things, but often it was just the discomfort of being stared at that was worse; it made you feel vulnerable; it reminded you of how much you were standing out. Then you’d get into the club and people would still be looking at you, but it felt good; it was a completely different experience because the club felt supportive they appreciated the effort you’d made.” (Female)

Obviously there are a different set of expectations operating in clubs; they are spaces where you’re supposed to be able to “go wild”, “let your hair down”, “mosh it up”. However, the extent to which punters can seize that opportunity is restricted by the rules of the particular club space they have entered. You can go wild but you can’t be violent, but as the vast majority of punters aren’t in the club to be violent towards one another this behavioural constraint isn’t registered as control or surveillance. The club gaze must be liberating and

encouraging, but how far people can then utilise this sense of informal social consent, to allow themselves to go “further” in the space, is regulated by a number of separate factors.

The first is their own sense of self confidence which will effect the way they experience and perceive of the space. You do see people in clubs looking uncomfortable and never fully engaging with the environment. However people learn how to club over time; they become more confident and through experiencing these spaces they learn the extent to which they can modify their behaviour in relation to the social rules of the club space. This process makes clubs easier to occupy over time; the process of embodying the altered rules of the space becomes easier, as people become more familiar with them.

The second factor was the one most directly related to Foucault’s notion of the gaze, as it arose from the look of the crowd and the style of club that you see before you when you enter. This immediate assessment of the event will effect your own relationship to it. It tells you whether you’re dressed appropriately, if this is your type of crowd and what sort of night you can expect. However, in the last instance these assessments can be voided by experiencing the social vibe of the club. If the club is rocking, if it possesses a positive and seductive gaze, then these potential fears about fitting in are replaced by the sense of being made welcome that is so important to the party in all its forms. The gaze controls behaviour, but in clubs it also liberates and encourages people to become part of clubbing and to adopt the rules of the particular club space people have entered, because clubbing is a sensual and embodied practice, which is very different from the embodied practices that exist away from clubs. The club gaze can not only enforce the ideas of the club space upon people, but it must also seduce the potential changes in bodily practices, that are such an important part of the experience, from within the regulated and controlled body that people occupy on a more day to day basis. You cannot be bullied into clubbing; clubs must seduce you and draw you in and that process of seduction is where their true social power lies.

Conclusion

The social model utilised in clubs is based on the social model of the party. This is enhanced and altered by the club space’s sensual intensity, that acts as a seductive force and binds the crowds together. The club experience is perceived as a radically different social experience by punters. The socio-sensual actuality of negotiating the everyday world is reversed, not as an idea, but as a deeply embodied social encounter that underpins people’s passion for the club space. This alteration is a social process that must be recreated over the

course of each club night. The idea behind clubbing is to have a good time, but what constitutes a good time in a club is grounded in a radical alteration in people's socio-sensual practice; they must move from one deeply embodied state to another deeply embodied state. This new state must then rise to the surface of the crowd's flesh; it must be made visible by their participation in the night. The club gaze must communicate the emotional reversal of the everyday gaze; it must be experienced in opposition to the controlling gaze of the everyday world; it cannot exert force, but must instead be seductive if it is to grant people the freedom they need to participate in the space.

Clubbing as a Bodily Technique

“The best times in my life so far, maybe they’ll be the best times I’ll ever have, have all come out of combining drugs, mates, sex, music and dancing in some way or another. It’s not always in clubs, but they were a good training ground; they taught me a lot about the art of living.” (Male 30; 14 years experience.)

Techniques of The Body

“Native women adopted a peculiar gait...that was acquired in youth, a loose-jointed swinging of the hips that looks ungainly to us, but was admired by the Maori. Mothers drilled their daughters in this accomplishment, termed onioni, and I have heard a mother say to her girl: “Ha! Kaore koe e onioni” (“you are not doing the onioni”) when the young one was neglecting to practise the gait.” (Mauss 1972:102)

The quotation above was used by Marcel Mauss to demonstrate how the body is a cultural product that is shaped and constructed by the society in which it is immersed. Cultures have different bodily techniques and habits which are transmitted both overtly through instruction, as above, and more covertly via the adoption, often through the process of mimesis, of particular physical habits. For Mauss the various bodily techniques employed by any particular culture played a role in constructing that culture’s habitus. Pierre Bourdieu (1977, 1992) expanded upon Mauss’s idea of the habitus by relating the bodily realm, discussed by Mauss, to the ideological structures of a culture.

In his formulation habitus was an aspect of the body of social relations and cultural practice that was grounded in the unchallenged, taken for granted, ideas of a society.

The notion of habitus is in itself fairly diffuse and hard to pin down; it is part of the fabric of a culture, but it is rarely articulated by that culture; it is lived more than it is expressed; it is held within the way people occupy space, the way they interact socially, their physical stance within the world. In many ways a society’s habitus is the physical and emotional manifestation of that society’s rules and ideological perspectives, which have been embodied by both individuals and groups. It is the bodily actuality of gender relations, class relations, points of reciprocity and morality.

For me, the habitus of a culture is a deeply emotional construct, although very little work has appeared which explored this particular aspect of the habitus. The simplest example of this aspect of the habitus in action would be the feeling of guilt. We feel guilt when we have broken one of the rules of our own society, but, more surprisingly, we can still feel guilt

when we've broken one of our society's social rules, even when we no longer agree, at an ideological level, with that rule. Take this example given by one informant when we ended up discussing her ideas about sex:

"In my head I know that sex is nothing to be ashamed of, that my sexuality is my own, that the only morality which I believe in, in relation to sex, is based in open and honest consent between people. It's taken me a long time to make that idea an actuality though, because even though it was what I believed and what I'd tell you, it wasn't always what I felt and it's taken a lot longer for those feelings to catch up with my ideas."

"Can you give me an example?"

"Anal sex is probably the best example. I really enjoy it now, but I used to be really squeamish about it. I used to feel dirty and a bit slutty and feel a bit uncomfortable with the whole thing even though I knew that there was nothing wrong with it. I knew it wasn't immoral, but for a long time it still felt sort of immoral. I felt like a dirty girl, which had its own thrill, but was also really dull, because those feelings didn't match my ideas and that was frustrating. I felt like I was betraying myself, as I don't think sex is dirty, and now I just fuck how I want and the sense of guilt's gone; I've done it enough to experience it positively; it feels good; my partner and I enjoy it; he doesn't think it's dirty or weird or anything, so I feel comfortable with it. I know it's not wrong in my head and my gut feelings have stopped trying to disagree with me."

This quotation illustrates the relationship between the body and the social ideas which surround it. On one side we have anal sex as a taboo, a "dirty" thing, that's transgressive and which reflects certain ideas about the person engaged in it. On the other side we have anal sex as a sexual practice that feels good, that is sensual, that takes place consensually and is just another variation in people's ongoing sexual practice. My informant could change her ideas about anal sex, but it took far longer to disentangle herself from the feelings through which those ideas manifested themselves as an embodied social force. It was only through experience that this gap was finally bridged and her ideas once again matched her feelings. I used this example because it reveals the extent to which social ideas infiltrate the physical being of social actors, that they reside within them as physical, mental and emotional constructs and that simply changing your ideas on a certain subject is often only the first step in a process of change, that must eventually become embodied as a new sensually assured ideology.

In "*The Emotional Brain*", Joseph LeDoux quotes economist Robert Frank's assertion that:

"Many actions, purposely taken with full knowledge of their consequences are irrational." (LeDoux 1999:36)

This may be true when rationality is seen in terms of the formal, theoretical rules of logic, but, as Damasio points out in *"The Feeling of What Happens"* (1999), our emotions play a huge role in creating this rationality in the first place, particularly in relation to people's personal and social lives. Someone who has had their emotional system damaged can:

"Still use the instruments of their rationality and can still call up knowledge of the world around them. Their ability to tackle the logic of a problem remains intact. Nonetheless, many of their personal and social decisions are irrational, more often disadvantageous to their self and to others than not."
(Damasio 1999:41)

So these patients could cope with abstract theoretical problems, that involved no social and personal risk or conflict, but couldn't handle the far more complex realm of actual social relations. The more personal and social a problem is the more important the role played by the emotions becomes in allowing us to tackle it. I would argue that this situation arises because human beings feel their lives emotionally, more than they perceive of them as abstract problems of rationality; knowing your own emotional state and the emotional state of others and being able to judge the impact your actions, in the world, has on the emotions of others is absolutely essential in order to socialise successfully.

So we have two types of logic operating simultaneously. The first is grounded in the external rationality of any given social system and reflects that system's beliefs and social perspectives. The second is the emotional connection between people as a lived actuality, desire, anger, fear, joy etc., the emotions that bind people to one another, or keep them apart, which are themselves structured by the beliefs of any given social system. Yet I would argue that the second system, the emotional and sensual system, provides the power, force and sense of attachment and meaningfulness to the first. This is interesting in light of Bourdieu's contention that:

"Because the *habitus* is an infinite capacity for generating products-thoughts, perceptions, expressions and actions-whose limits are set by the historically and socially situated conditions of its production, the conditioned and conditional freedom it provides is as remote from creation of unpredictable novelty as it is from simple mechanical reproduction of the original conditioning." (Bourdieu 1990:55)

The habitus keeps the past in the present and structures people's perspective on the future by modelling it upon the reproduction of the present and therefore the past. I would contend that the habitus is lodged within the emotional system, which is itself part of Damasio's "proto-self" upon which consciousness is constructed. The habitus suffuses the minutiae of our social interactions at a deeply embodied level; it makes certain experiences feel

comfortable and others feel uncomfortable; this can arise from exposure to particular ideas or objects, but it also mediates bodily postures, proxemic relations, experiences of intimacy, emotional attachments, that is the socio-sensual practice of inhabiting your own world and sharing that world with others. This sensual experience of the world has its own logic, the logic of practice, as Bourdieu called it, and this sensual logic is taken for granted and never really challenged, because it never becomes visible; it simply is. Again, to quote Bourdieu:

“The body believes in what it plays at: it weeps if it mimes grief. It does not represent what it performs, it does not memorize the past, it enacts the past, bringing it back to life. What is ‘learned by body’ is not something one has, like knowledge that can be brandished, but something that one is.” (Bourdieu 1990:73)

A statement that is complimented by LeDoux’s assertion that:

“The learning and remembrance of manual skills might be mediated by some system other than the temporal lobe system.” (LeDoux 98:195)

The habitus is a “manual skill”, but a manual skill that is aimed at the work of socialising in specific ways within particular systems of socio-sensual morality, propriety and constraint which in turn grants it its own logic.

I have taken this detour because I want to examine clubbing as a particular collection of bodily techniques, but I want to expand upon Mauss’s and Bourdieu’s original formulation by suggesting that the physical and emotional experiences, offered by clubbing, can produce alterations in the logic of practice and subsequently people’s perspective upon their own world. That these experiences have their own sensual logic, that they feel both intense and meaningful while remaining frivolous and fun. It is also my contention that the bodily techniques of clubbing are democratising a particularly Dionysian form of physical experience, that the physical intensity they offer were once the preserve of religious practice or a particular bohemian lifestyle, the intensity of which is gradually becoming a mainstream phenomena.

I also want to explore the way in which the bodily techniques of clubbing challenge Mauss’s belief that:

“There is no (bodily) technique and no transmission in the absence of tradition.” (Mauss 1979:104)

The bodily techniques of clubbing have no real tradition in the West; they have antecedents, but these antecedents have usually been viewed negatively, as clubbing still is, by legislators and the legal authorities. The actual physical experience of clubbing has challenged and expanded upon the sensual parameters of Western experience and has

allowed more and more people to apperceive this sensual shift. More importantly these experiences are social; they are shared, witnessed, communicated and encountered with other people on a scale which is unparalleled outside of religious practice, joining the military or the ability to use a hula-hoop. Despite some cultural differences clubbing has generated a series of bodily techniques which have become a global phenomena; a series of physical forms that are grounded in the intensification of physical, emotional and social experiences.

These bodily techniques are felt as a radical departure from everyday bodily practice and it's structuring logic; a schism in the physical fabric of culture that is rapidly becoming democratised as more and more people experience their seductive allure. They are not then traditional; in most cases they're not even recognised, as legitimate, within the cultures which house them. They developed at the edge of culture and have gradually become more and more mainstream over time. There are variations in these techniques: a crowd dancing to "Gabba", while speeding out of their boxes, is very different from a crowd on E, who are all loved up and wriggly. Yet both styles generate alternative experiences that are grounded in the construction, intensification and articulation of physical and mental states in a social environment.

The question I want to pose then is what happens when the deeply embodied ideological glue of habitus is challenged, not by a counter ideology but instead by a radically different sensuality that grants intense physical, emotional and social experiences to participants? What happens when a fairly large section of the populace begins to occupy and feel their social worlds in ways different from those of the habitus? We have already touched upon this topic in the previous chapters, but I now want to pull together some of this data into a more theoretical perspective that is nevertheless still grounded in the actual practices of clubbing.

The Sensual Knowledge of Clubbing

Abandonment.

"Clubbing taught me about the joy of abandonment. Abandoning yourself to the whole thing. It's quite a young lifestyle as well; it's still developing."
(Female 32; 9 years experience.)

What is a lifestyle of abandonment? What does it mean? Abandonment came up again and again in the interviews as being a positive experience that was valued by participants. However, there were degrees of abandonment; it was rarely a case of absolute abandonment and when it was it usually meant that things were about to get, or had got, a bit messy. Even then, when this sense of abandonment was derived from excessive and total intoxication people still found things to value in the experience.

I will explore three types of abandonment that are intimately linked to one another; they play into each other and intensify the others' presence. Abandonment is a potent experience; it is a particular style of being in the world that is intimately linked to the moment in which it occurs. To abandon yourself is to cast off both past and future and to reside absolutely in the present; you're not thinking about yesterday or worrying about tomorrow; you are seizing pleasure right there and right then. The world outside of this space and time diminishes to the point of non-existence. One informant summed it up like this:

"When you're in the thick of a really rocking night the world outside the club doors ceases to exist; it has no real relevance, because you're just focused on the party and having a good time." (Male)

The idea of living for the moment is obviously not new, but the experience of living in the moment was not an easy thing to accomplish for many people. Clubbing changed that by creating intense, passionate and socially charged environments that taught people "the joys of abandonment". In the process people's perceptions of what constituted pleasure changed; it was intensified, socialised into an alternate form; its distractions were reduced to a minimum. Sensual hedonism got more hedonistic for more people because it found a home and ceased to be the preserve of the hyper-rich and decadent. For some of my informants this search for pleasure has become a total lifestyle, for others it is a hobby. As one informant pointed out:

"What a lot of people fail to realise about all the clubbing and drugging is that it's simply a leisure option nowadays, whether you get off on it or not is just a matter of personal taste, some people like golf, some like football, some like antiques fairs or going to the theatre, some people like skydiving, others like drugging and dancing. It's just a way of enjoying themselves with their mates. I know people who have arranged their whole lives around it, because it's their favourite thing to do. Then there's the ones who dabble and just get out there when it's convenient, because they've got other stuff they want to do as well. I also know people who arranged their whole life so they could spend the majority of their time scuba-diving. I don't see the difference except the law keeps insisting one's valid and one's not; it's bollocks people will have their pleasure. Clubbing's often called escapist, but why is it any more escapist than reading alone in your room, or pouring

over your stamp collection, or listening to classical music. No one ever claims that these are escapist, do they, they're just hobbies, things that people enjoy, a way of passing time between birth and death." (Male 27; 10 years experience.)

In terms of clubbing abandonment arises in a number of ways:

1: Physical abandonment: the joy of giving yourself to the music, the dancing, the swirl of the crowd. The physicality of clubbing is fluid, expressive and super charged. The body in sublime sensual motion. However, most of the time we are really talking about a relative state of physical abandonment set within the sociality of the club; the joy of watching people loosen up, shedding the muscular habits of the everyday world, bodies becoming expressive and sensuous, pleasure dripping off the crowd, the grins, the laughter. Most importantly, the dancing which carries its own meaning. To dance is to physically occupy a meaningful time and meaningful space, that is the secret of dance. That's why every culture dances.

2: Emotional abandonment: for many people in clubs the emotional insecurities of the everyday world evaporate to a degree. They become more expressive; they communicate with a heightened intensity, but that communication is predominantly physical or blarney based; it's about "communicating for the sheer joy of communicating". It's rarely opinionated or particularly deep in terms of ideas; it's far too noisy most of the time for intellectual games; it is a raw form of emotional communication; it's celebratory. As one informant so succinctly put it:

"You're allowed to be happy in clubs; you don't have to explain why you're happy; you don't have to justify it; you can just be happy. People don't expect you to be happy in life in general; they don't trust it; misery grants you a lot more kudos; if you're happy people think there's something wrong with you; you must be naive, but that's rubbish, things aren't perfect, but in comparison to much of the rest of the world we're pampered in the West, but if you actually dare to claim that we are lucky people treat you like a freak, because it challenges the excuses they use to justify their own failures and their own misery, but in a club you can be happy. It's actually expected of you; it's the one place where being a miserable git is considered ridiculous rather than meaningful." (Female 41; 19 years experience.)

Why would people value a space in which you can simply express happiness? I think the answer lies in the connection between the body and the emotions. The feeling of an emotional response is intimately linked to how that emotion is expressed on a physical level. As Merleau-Ponty suggests:

"The gesture *does not make me think* of anger, it is anger itself." (Merleau-Ponty 1994:184)

It terms of the club environment you are in a space that is physically more expressive than other spaces; you can express your emotions through your body and this point of physicalisation intensifies the experience of the emotion. You can express your happiness in a club; you don't have to constrain its appearance so you are allowed to relish it to its maximum potential.

Another informant suggested that:

“Clubs and E have made me more emotionally expressive. I ran up to G one night threw my arms around him and was saying, ‘Oh hello darling, how are you? God it’s good to see you.’ and I’d never of done that before. I know it sounds a bit ‘lovey’, but I really like G, so why shouldn’t I tell an old friend how good it is to see him? Why shouldn’t I be enthusiastic about that friendship? It’s the truth and the smile I got in return suggested he felt the same. You get to celebrate your friends and be open with them.” (Female 32; 9 years experience.)

Again we’re talking about a relative abandonment with, as we saw in the section on ecstasy, people making a strong distinction between friends and strangers in terms of the meaning they attach to the encounter.

The physical intensification and sense of emotional abandonment, that people experience in clubs, allows those emotions to be savoured within an expanded body. You can express an almost insane level of happiness in clubs, to a degree that would be unthinkable in other public spaces, and I would argue that this level of expressivity actually deepens the sense of happiness people feel by allowing it to reverberate across their entire body.

3: Social Abandonment: Whether living it up with friends, or talking animatedly to strangers, the club spaces houses an informal breed of social encounter wherein at least a portion of the fear, anxiety and mistrust, that often suffuses social relations, is abandoned. In the best clubs the crowds forget to judge one another, because they’re too busy having a laugh. As one informant explained:

“You meet someone in a club and you realise that they are a bit of a laugh and you’ll talk to them all night and have a laugh with them and there’s nothing else involved just enjoying people. It taught society how to get on at the end of the day. Not everyone, there’s always some deadheaded arseholes in any club, but for the majority clubs are a place in the middle where they can meet.” (Male 28; 12 years experience)

The informality of the club space, combined with the intention to simply enjoy yourself and other people for the night, creates this sense of clubs being “places in the middle”, where you can learn to get on with people. We take the act of socialising for granted in many ways but, like any other skill, it improves with practice and clubs are good spaces to practice and

gain confidence because, as we have seen in the 'vibe' chapter, people's actions in the club space have a minimal impact on other areas of their lives, which makes them a distinct social arena.

People abandon a lot of their social reserve in a club, as we saw in the section on the club gaze; they get off on the crowds and enjoy them; they relish the sensation of being part of that crowd. They experience it positively and that allows them to go further, to become bigger and more expressive, to be less self conscious and scared.

The three forms of abandonment I laid out above are fluid; they combine and dissolve into and through one another, changing tempo, offering different forms of intensity, suffusing the night as a whole, rather than existing as a single onastic peak. They manifest themselves in chance meetings, wonderful visions, hysterical laughter, moments of introspection, bizarre conversations, sudden rushes of beauty, discovering fabulous people, seeing a club "go off" before your eyes. It is the actuality of movement, the burn of your own and your friends' excitement, the allure of bodies writhing on a beat. Its immediacy is one of its most powerful and ethereal qualities. However, as one informant suggested:

"One minute you're there, absolutely in the thick of it, rushing on a tune, or talking ten to the dozen with someone, or just watching everything go off, feeling fucking magnificent, then the next second you're wondering whether you've got enough milk in the fridge, so you can have a nice cup of tea when you get home. It's funny to go from absolute Waaah to utter mundanity in a split second, but fuck it, I like it; it adds to the whole thing, keeps it in perspective, stops you turning into a toad licking crustie." (Male 31; 11 years experience.)

So clubbing is not a single, constant state it is a series of states that range from the sublime to the ridiculous. It is however a technique of the body, a skill you can learn, a physical and mental stance towards pleasure. To experience it you have to throw yourself in headfirst. You have to overcome distance and seize the potential for pleasure that the space offers. One particularly full-on, gurning to the max, Australian, clubbing household, who were interviewed for BBC 2's *"Choice World Clubbing"*, put it like this:

"This house's attitude towards clubbing: go hard or go home, because you're here for a good time not a long time."

Abandonment as a hobby, a leisure option, one amongst many. Like many other hobbies it can become people's central passion, sometimes for a couple of years, sometimes longer. For some people clubbing defines them in the world both to themselves and others. It means they are not mundane, not like the rest of the population, because they have tasted the full

intensity of the club gig; they have had those conspiratorial experiences, where their existence shifted gear and the pleasure of living burnt deep within their flesh. People who haven't done the "druggin", dancin, getting on down thing may well view it as false or escapist, but for clubbers it is the people who have never tried it that don't have a clue how to live. In clubbers' eyes they are the unimaginative ones that believe the intensity of life is set within specific parameters, rather than being a fluid and permeable property of the flesh. Something that can be changed at will. As one informant said:

"What was pleasure 30 years ago for most people? Sitting around a pub chatting, a weeks holiday in Bognor Regis in the rain, maybe a disco full of drunks on Saturday night, smoking a bit of spliff as a wild and special treat. Obviously for a few it's always been more than that, but not for the many; well that's changing, now pleasure is two weeks in Ibiza splattered out of your conch, round the world air tickets, a psychedelic sunrise, fucking on drugs. In Britain our very notion of what constitutes pleasure has radically changed; it's all about a shift in intensity and a change in morality, the way the world feels has changed; to be honest I think we're still getting used to it; we haven't fully learnt how to cope with it yet." (Male 34; 16 years experience.)

Another put it this way:

"Well take weddings: they're something that has happened for hundreds of years. Couple of hundred years ago the prime focus was the religious ceremony. Then, I don't know, half way through the last century the focus became the meal and speeches. It was about communication and eating as a social event. Recently I was one of the DJs at a very posh wedding on a Saturday night. Rich folk, professionals, and there was the ceremony, then speeches and food. We happened to have a bag of Es on us, mentioned this to a couple of people and woomf they were gone, like locusts had struck. Then we started playing the tunes and the party really started to kick off, everyone started dancing, the E was obviously kicking in and we had a fucking great night. It made the wedding in many ways; it was the icing on the cake, the big finale. Nowadays, even old people understand that dancing and partying is the thing that brings people together; it's not the religion or the food; they are no longer the peak moment for most people at a wedding, particularly the younger ones; it's been usurped by music and dancing and, whenever possible, a few drugs, that's become the benchmark of a good time for more and more people; it's the thing they compare other experiences against." (Male 32; 14 years experience.)

The British perspective upon what counts as pleasure is changing, our experiences and our notions of pleasure have shifted for an ever growing percentage of the population. The combination of factors you find in clubs, the people, the music, the drugs, the sex, the dancing offers a set of potentials each with the ability to give pleasure. They are the basic elements in an on-going socio-sensual activity that is anchored in the idea of "having a laugh with your mates". It is more accurate to look at these club potentials, these disparate

phenomena housed in a single space, as things to be shared; it is through sharing them that people experience the most pleasure. This is hedonism as a social rather than an individual force; it is grounded in the connectivity that arises within the club between friends and strangers alike. It is a sociality that arises from an extreme state of sensual intensity. That's why ecstasy was so important in altering our perspective on what makes a good night out; it changed the social experience of that night.

In the initial period of clubbing the sociality frames and serves the sensual, it makes it accessible, later as clubbers continue to club the sensual begins to serve the social, which becomes the major focus of the experience. Most importantly this sensuality becomes a tool for altering and intensifying particular sets of social relationships. My informants all agreed on one thing, after years in clubs getting drugged up, dancing like "nutters", sucking on tune after immaculate tune, the thing that they ended up valuing most was the people who they'd shared it all with.

The Gender Blender

In Bourdieu's work on Kabyle society one of the main indicators of the structuring force of the habitus was the difference between the bodily practices of women and men. Their bodies were structured in opposition to one another and this structuring had profound social effects, at all other levels, of conceptualising and naturalising gender difference in Kabyle society. These differences exist in all societies including Britain. However, I would contend that clubbing temporarily shatters these bodily codes, that the clubbing body is not so much a gendered body but a Dionysian body. In Malbon's (1999) work he discusses the idea that clubs are a potential space of liberation for women; he notes that women both enjoy the lack of sexual pressure in clubs and that they can get to be sexual for themselves, both statements that I would agree with. However, I would contend that by focusing on women he has skewed the object of study, because clubbing liberates the bodies of both men and women and it is this shared liberatory practice that produces the club as a whole. So men are just as liberated and can get to experience their bodies in very different ways in club as much as women can.

One of the most important elements in this shift in bodily practice relates to intoxication. As we saw in the section on alcohol, in the intoxication chapter, women's intoxication was always viewed in a far harsher light than men's. A drunken woman would be judged in a more negative way than a drunken man. This created a gender disparity within the field of

intoxication: men and women drank differently and women were supposed to remain more sober and in control than men, as befitted their status as the carriers of virtue in society. (See: Dimitra Gefou-Madianou 1992 and Maryon Macdonald 1994 for further discussion.) Then ecstasy appeared and, I would argue that it equalised this disparity in intoxicated states, by generating a shared Dionysian body that was removed from the social models which surrounded alcohol. Suddenly, men and women were both getting completely “out of it” around one another, but they were doing so in a radically different way than they would’ve upon alcohol, because alcohol intoxication had been encultured over the years to reflect the gender differences of the everyday world. Getting drunk was imbued with the logic of practice, that suffused the wider world of gender relations, dropping an E wasn’t.

The early days of rave produced two sets of Dionysian bodies male and female, but both grounded in the reduction of social fear and insecurity, which in turn underpinned a novel form of social practice. A sense of sensual equality marked the club space out as different from other social spaces. Everyone was “on-one” and a presumption of emotional and sensual mutuality arose within the club space. Men ceased to be “from Mars”, women ceased to be “from Venus”, instead they had landed on planet ecstasy, which swallowed the presumption of gender difference whole. This shift wasn’t grounded in the dissipation of desire between the sexes; people were getting too hot and sweaty to not feel like sexual beings. It was a communicative shift grounded in the gentleness that accompanies ecstasy. Women and men started to talk more, to share the dancefloor, to enjoy each other’s company, to feel less threatened by one another.

The presumptions of feminism, that men always possessed power over women, hid the actual social insecurity and confusion many men felt, when they were around women. As traditionally the people who had to make the first advance towards women many men felt a keen fear of rejection, a sense that they couldn’t just talk to a woman, because it would immediately be presumed that they were trying to chat them up. Friendly banter was always a loaded exercise, because communication was perceived as sexual communication, as if that was all women and men could ever have in common. Yet, under the influence of ecstasy the presumption that sex was the only reason that people would want to talk to the opposite sex diminished. They began: “Communicating for the sheer joy of communicating”

As one informant explained:

“One night this guy walked over and just said ‘I just wanted to tell you how gorgeous you look’ and that didn’t feel like a come on and later I met him and his girlfriend, so it hadn’t been a come on at all. It was just a lovely thing to have said to you. If a guy starts talking to me and he doesn’t come

across as having an ulterior motive then I am quite happy to chat to him and I don't worry about it at all. You get more astute over time at working out what people's motives are; a lot of it's non-verbal; it's their body language you can tell if someone's trying to pick you up or whether they're just having a good time and they want to chat to someone." (Female 32; 9 years experience.)

This ability to approach people and just compliment them or chat with them arises from the emotional rush of ecstasy; its "social exuberance" as one informant called it, and as this woman suggests body language plays an important role in that communication and the body language of the ecstasy user is very different from the body language of a drinker. The same informant continued:

"I think the E experience has shifted and maybe even confused some of the relations between women and men in clubs, because the being friendly thing, well when does that move into something else, when does it become being seduced? You can think a guy's just being friendly, whereas the guy thinks his friendliness is a come on to you and vice versa. That's part of the difficulty when everyone's E'd up, then everyone's a lot more friendly and I think clubbing's muddied the water, because when a guy used to come up to you, you used to presume he was trying to pick you up and so your reaction would be solely based on whether you fancied him or not and I used to be wary of giving out the wrong signals, by being friendly to a guy I'd met in case he thought I fancied him. You could just smile at some guys and they'd follow you around all night like a dog and that's changed which is great. Once men could appreciate that a woman being nice to them doesn't necessarily mean they want to shag them, then clubs got a lot better, but now people don't know when it is the case. I think people need to be much more obvious and straightforward in clubs when they're making a move. I don't mind men being direct as long as they're not rude and can take no for an answer, without getting all aresy and sulky like little boys." (Female 32; 9 years experience.)

This shift in relations, the sudden increased friendliness in club spaces between women and men, changed the way they communicated and blurred the traditional rules of seduction. People still ended up in bed with each other, but clubs ceased to feel like "cattle markets" for women, because men had begun to participate more intensely in the club space and weren't just standing around drinking and trying to pluck up the courage to chat someone up. Yet, as this informant suggests, it also led to some confusion, a blurring of signals and counter signals from within the sensually altered bodies of E'd up punters. This is interesting in light of the rules of engagement that exist in the fetish club scene, where being candid about your desires and intentions is one way of dealing with the increased sexual rush of the space. This straightforward sociality only works because it occurs in a space where the right to ask and the right to refuse are both accepted practices.

This altered social experience between women and men has had a profound effect on gender relations even away from the club space. I would go so far as to suggest that it accelerated the sense of social equality between women and men, because they learnt how to communicate with one another in an altered form, that escaped the embodied logic of gendered practice in the everyday world. Through sharing these extreme sensual states women and men began to share the same Dionysian body and the same emotional rushes; they were equal, but equality didn't mean that sex, desire and seduction had to be eviscerated from their relationships; it just meant that it ceased to be the sole basis of those relationships during the leisure hours of the night. As the ecstasy scene receded, to be replaced by other styles of club; the crowds who had shared that experience continued to reproduce the style of communication they had experienced on ecstasy; it became part of people's knowledge of how to behave in the club space and beyond. The intoxicant that my female informants mistrusted most, in terms of how it made men behave towards women, was alcohol:

"Clubs get that cattle market feel back when there are too many drunks; I think the laddy thing takes over. When will guys learn that women want men not lads. I think it's the booze they drink to get some courage up, but they have to drink so much before they've got the bottle to talk to you that they're just drooling by the time they get round to it. Whereas with E or even coke and speed they seem to be able to get the confidence they need to approach you without turning into complete dicks." (Female 29; 11 years experience.)

Women's attitudes towards booze has itself changed, they are drinking more, and at least part of that shift is due to the fact that women and men have got used to being heavily intoxicated around one another. So the gender divide, that stressed female propriety over male drunkenness, has itself collapsed, which means that whatever the intoxicant there is still a sense of mutuality between the crowds, women can "cane" it like men "cane" it. One informant summed it up like this:

"I want to be somewhere where men and women don't have to behave differently, that's my utopia and I'm not interested in clubs when women and men can't just do the same things." (Male 32; 14 years experience.)

Chemical Intimacy

The visceral nature of clubbing, its physical, emotional and social potential has altered the way in which people socialise. This is particularly evident in a crowd of E'd up clubbers, but this stranger based experience is not the facet of clubbing which seems to be valued in

the long term by clubbers, instead it is the way in which the experiences, offered by the club space, reverberate within the social groups who share them that has the strongest and most lasting effect. Getting drugged up with your friends is “a great way to spend your time” and the Class As intensify this experience beyond the limits of what is achievable on alcohol, which was, for so long, the only way to share an intoxicated state with your friends. As an informant said;

“There’s nothing like going out and popping an E with someone to cement a friendship.” (Female)

As we have seen the effects of the club drugs expands the time people spend together and the energy available to them and the way they interact. Together these three aspects of the clubbing gig, that can take place away from clubs themselves as much as they occur within them, are one of clubbing’s major attractions for participants. The all-back-to-mine element of clubbing, that I mentioned previously, can provide an alternative arena in which to socialise and explore the sensual states that arise in clubs. In some cases taking drugs with your friends round at someone’s house can begin to replace clubbing as a way of socialising the drug hit. As one informant explained:

“The last E I had was just with a couple of friends round at their place; it was lovely we just lolled around, talking, giggling; it was very intimate and relaxed, gentle in comparison to being in a club. I felt really close to them; I mean they’re my friends so I am close to them, but it’s just good to experience that sort of strong connection to them; it reminds you how amazing they are; it stops you taking them for granted.” (Female 30; 11 years experience.)

This experience of not taking your friends for granted is important; it happens both inside and, as in this example, outside of the club space.

When drugs are taken in a quieter environment the focus remains with the people you’re with. You have long, intimate and sometimes bizarre conversations, as the drugs facilitate the process of making odd connections between ideas. As one informant said:

“Clubbers talk about different things, sometimes it’s really stupid, mad bullshit but that’s not the end of it; they’re not scared to talk about their feelings, their dreams; they’re less frightened of expressing themselves, but when they do they’re not so precious about them; they can often see the funny side as well, even when they’re being serious about something; they don’t get so serious that they can’t laugh about it at some point. I think that’s really healthy.” (Female 32; 9 years experience.)

This particular style of intimacy, that is both intense and frivolous, arises from a certain social contract that exists between drug users. You can get really down on drugs, you can get very caught up in ideas and emotions, but clubbers have developed a particular style of

social interaction, which keeps this side of drugs to a minimum. People don't want to be the downer on the night. As one informant explained:

“In clubs you start by talking about clubbing and then conversations go off on a tangent some of it's social chit chat, then people tell antics and club stories, that's more the type of thing you talk about with strangers. I don't want to get too deep or serious with people; I get enough of that at work. Sometime you talk to boyfriends about where you're at and where you're going, because it's a bit easier to do when you're chilled out, but otherwise not too deep.” (Female 32; 9 years experience.)

A particular social contract is formed between people sharing drugs; they've taken the drugs to have fun, so even when conversations turn intense that sense of having fun still infiltrates them. Sometimes that humour can get very dark and warped, but it's still there. This style of social interaction is a difficult one to imagine unless you've had it. It is intimate, open, honest and funny; one minute you're talking about something serious and important to you, the next you've dissolved into a fit of giggles; it has its own rhythms and logic. It is the social practice of intoxication. The psychedelics and ecstasy can leave you emotionally fragile and vulnerable; drug teams are supportive because they recognise this aspect of the experience. However, if someone consistently falls apart on drugs, but still insists on taking them, they will find themselves left out because they are a downer on the nights. Experienced drug users expect each other to be fairly self reliant on drugs, to be able to cope with their effects and not behave like a “lightweight”. They expect one another to contribute to the experience, rather than detract from it and they respect this ability. This tends to bring out the best in people; they want to “keep things sweet”; they don't want to bitch and whine all night; they avoid moaning and try to remain positive, so that they can control the emotional alterations initiated by the drugs.

You have this curious split then, where clubbers are supportive, open and laid back in their relationships, while they simultaneously expect people to be able look after themselves over the course of a night out. Part of this support arises from respect and that respect is gained by being fairly self sufficient and adding something to the night. When people start to become a “party liability” then that respect is withdrawn, not immediately, they give each other the chance to sort themselves out but over time, if they fail to pull themselves together, if they become a downer the majority of the time, then they will be excluded.

The sharing of drug states is one of the primary motivations for taking drugs; taking them on your own just isn't the same; they are predominately social tools. However, as we have seen not all drugs give access to the same types of experience. In my experience sharing

psychedelics with people, in which I include ecstasy, changes the interpersonal dynamic of the group far more radically than the accelerants, because they bring about more intense psycho-physical alterations in people's sense of self and other. One informant gave a detailed description of the social differences he perceived between drugs and why he valued these states:

"The phrase I'd use is chemical overlap, when you're on cocaine your ego expands to the point where it covers several people around you. When you're on E you just feel that everyone else's ego has expanded into you. There's a chemical overlap, instead of being rigid lines between what's me and what isn't me they extend into each other and you get an overlap and you find this space that's still at bit of you, but it's also both of us as well. Normally you get that with loving intimate relationships, but the drugs can do that, but in a different way." (Male 32; 14 years experience.)

This quote reveals a particular perspective upon the notion of intimacy. When he speaks of overlap he is suggesting a particular kind of relationship, a connection that is felt at an emotional level. It is not reliant upon sharing words or opinions, but is about feeling another's presence and a connection to them, which is grounded in sharing and enjoying that presence without feeling as if you're under any pressure to articulate it. It's like touching somebody without actually touching them. Touch has an immediate presence; it is profoundly intimate in a way that words can rarely match. This informant's notion of overlap, the way the ego expands or contracts in relation to various drugs, is a physical sensation that other users report and I can confirm through my own experiences. He goes on:

"Even when you're with someone who you're intimate with you can still be conscious of yourself. Truly great intimate moments are when you're practically as one. One of the great signs of intimacy is to be able to be completely silent around one another, without there being any pressure to talk, or interact, or without being uncomfortable with the silence. There's no pressure of communication and being drugged up there is no pressure of communication, because you can be utterly insular about dancing or just watching the people around you or you can be really social about it. It's about not having to follow particular social conventions and doing things that you wouldn't otherwise do. There's a lack of self censorship; you cease to self censor and I think that's a very healthy thing for most people." (Male 32; 14 years experience.)

The idea of a "loving intimate relationship" and the ability to be silent with someone, without feeling uncomfortable, suggests the experience is felt as a high degree of intimacy the sort of intimacy that arises from long term relationships with people where you don't feel as if you have to put on a show, but can simply be yourself.

When this experience is had with strangers it's wonderful. As the following informant explained:

"In terms of making mates, often it doesn't go beyond the club with complete strangers. Sometimes you're making contact while dancing and moving around and you get to enjoy the presence of another person and it can make you curious so you can end up talking to them. I also really enjoy the anonymous element sometimes. I used to club completely on my own and feel really good things with other people and not exchange a word and just leave it as history when I left. I think that sort of contact is excellent really feeling closer to people and yet not doing the business or taking it further; it's just a little gift that the night gives you." (Female 30; 12 years experience.)

However, this feeling can evaporate once you part; it has an effect on the way you perceive of people, but if that form of perception isn't backed up by your other encounters, with people in the world, it can begin to be treated with suspicion. However, when you have these experience with friends then they become part of your on-going, shared, social history. They take place within a social framework and play a role in revitalising and intensifying that framework. This is particularly interesting in the light of the following assertions by informants:

"I don't think I'd be so cool about being single if I didn't get to have these really intense experiences with my friends. We're a tight knit group. We have a good time together and it's not all drugging and clubbing, that's just one side of our friendship, but you form strong emotional bonds with the people you take drugs with regularly; they help take that friendship to a different level; I think I touch my friends more now, and that's important; I'd hate to have to go through life without being able to touch people. I think E's changed that between friends; you never used to see gangs of tough looking guys with their arms round each other, did you? I'm not saying I want to remain single for ever, but when you're having this good a time it doesn't seem so important to find a partner." (Female 29; 12 years experience.)

The number of single people in our society is growing rapidly. A report by the office of national statistics revealed that 30% of households consisted of a single person living alone, which is a 20% rise on the figure from 1960. There are obviously a series of factors at work, which are leading to this phenomena, in terms of this study I would suggest that the experience of friendship has changed for many people. This is a hard idea to pin down; friendship has had a particularly revered status, as a form of social relationship in Britain and most other societies as well. However, its importance is growing for a number of reasons. Firstly more and more people are living away from the family who raised them which, at least theoretically, was supposed to provide their main source of social support. In London,

where this study was based, there are huge numbers of people who are no longer near their families or the friends who they grew up with; this doesn't mean that they don't value their relationships with their family just that they don't see them as often. More of these people are remaining single longer; the same office of national statistics report revealed that the average age of marriage for men had risen above 30, while it has risen to 28 for women and many of these people value their single lifestyle, because it grants them a certain amount of freedom.

However, being single is one thing, but these people don't want to be alone. These changes have put an extra emphasis on the importance of friendships, as the core social relationship for many people, particularly in terms of how long these friendships remain the core social relationship. Now, the difference between classifying someone as a friend or a lover is predominantly sexual; it arises from the sensual content of the relationship and traditionally there are sensual limits to friendship. It is my contention that the drugging, clubbing, all-back-to-mine experience adds an extra sensual and emotional dimension to people's friendships, that alter these sensual limits. The type of emotional experiences, that people have through sharing these drug and club experiences, expands the sensual parameters of people's relationships. This is not necessarily a sexual experience it exists in its own grey area, somewhere between sex and play; it is certainly of the body; it can be both erotic and frivolous. It arises from within the pre-existing sensual states, that clubbing underpins, and manifests itself as a form of sensual slippage between people. It can become fairly extreme, giggly, group sex for the sheer fun of it or it can remain at a more muted level, just having someone wrapped in your arms, stroking their hair, kissing, massaging them, while other people talk and laugh around you. It is about sharing a level of sensual intimacy, which moves beyond the traditional boundaries of friendship. One informant explained how she had ended up spending the night sharing her mate's rather beautiful boyfriend:

"We were just playing around snogging and laughing. We didn't shag. It was just something to do, a way of spending time together which meant that I didn't have to be left out, which would have happened in the past."
(Female)

Another club team I spent time with had begun by dropping ecstasy in clubs, but now used to combine this by throwing parties at home with a few close friends, where they'd pop some pills and just share the rush with one another. They'd strip off or dress up, dragging the men up was a popular game, dance, massage each other, find ways to excite the senses, show off their bodies and get sexy; it was just laid back sensual fun. This group were a close knit and

supportive bunch of mates, who shared a high degree of trust and openness, and they were well aware of the role played by ecstasy in deepening their relationships and allowing them to experiment with the parameters of friendship. They still valued clubbing, but their engagement with the club space was also subtly changing; they began dressing up more, wearing more revealing costumes, utilising the freedom offered by the club space to its maximum potential.

One group had taken this experience to the next level; they had not only sensualised but sexualised their relationships with one another and they provided a particularly revealing model of how this process began:

“It began once we got back from our club nights; we’d all be in a really good mood and still full of drugs; we just started playing around with one another. The ecstasy gave you the confidence and made it seem less odd; it’s a gentle drug too; we started getting off with each other; it wasn’t serious. It didn’t happen all at once; it was a gradual thing. It sometimes felt a bit funny I’d be all over some girl, while my partner would be wrapped round another of my friends. It felt naughty, but that just added to it. It was fun to find yourself with a woman on each arm kissing, joking around, chatting, jumping in and out of the shower, getting naked, there was no pressure; we weren’t going anywhere in particular it just developed its own momentum. Not everyone joined in; it wasn’t expected; it was just going on if you fancied it. Then we started throwing parties at my place, just for my friends, sometimes just a couple of people, at others more of us. We had sex with another couple of mates-it was odd, exciting, but it was relaxed-we just took it easy, if it got a bit weird we’d stop and talk about it, then start again. A week or so later we met up and laughed about it; we’d all enjoyed it so we carried on; then more friends came round and we all ended up in the shower; one of the women starting grabbing willies; it took off from there. We were all drug fucked so Mr Droopy would come and go, as the night progressed, but it just didn’t matter; it was hysterical, but horny. I felt like I was living somebody else’s life, but I wasn’t, it was mine and it felt excellent. It doesn’t happen all the time, just say one night over the course of an occasional long week-end. It definitely grew out of the parties and the ecstasy was important; I don’t think I could have done it without the E; it just felt like a natural progression, an extension of the feelings that the drug offers and the way it makes you behave around your friends. I couldn’t do the hardcore orgy thing; I think it would be too serious; this is so laid back it’s almost silly; you’ve got nothing to prove to anyone because they’re all your friends. It’s just a different way of having a good time with them, an extension of our experiences together.” (Male 30; 12 years experience.)

This is an extreme example of a usually more muted phenomena; it arises from within the sensual states offered by clubbing and, as such, differs from the sex club scene. It is a particular form of chemical intimacy and, as the informant above points out, it didn’t start

life as an idea, no-one decided to throw a sex party, it arose out of cluster of sensual states that related to how individuals felt and interacted with one another. This is interesting when we relate it back to both Mauss's and Bourdieu's notion of habitus. Mauss identified the bodily element of habitus: the way in which society creates particular bodily practices and particular sensual parameters within relationships. Bourdieu expanded upon this idea and began to identify the relationship between that bodily construction and the ideas held by cultural groups, through examining the way in which this physicality makes those ideas tangible as a visceral, physical and emotional form. We can see that the socio-sensual states, found in clubs, have altered these bodily boundaries. The body has become a plaything; it has gained a certain fluidity, by being introduced to a heightened sensual world, and subsequently the moral and social sensibilities of my informants have been altered via these shared experiences.

However, another informant revealed one potential downside of this chemical intimacy:

"I used to live in a house with six other people, we were best friends did everything together, lived, worked, partied and we caned it for about four years and it was all right for a long time, but eventually it all got too weird and too intense. Incestuous, if you know what I mean. We were never apart and all these tensions started to build up and the drugs magnified them; we were fucked up constantly; we were getting paranoid and it just got really claustrophobic; we lost the ability to talk things through and in the end we had this really nasty split up and now a few years later there's still a lot of animosity associated with it. So although I think drugs can change the way you relate to people for the better, I still think you have to be careful and give each other space to breathe; you have to have sober time in there, and another outlet, otherwise it can spin out of control but, then again, that can happen to people's relationships even without any drugs, can't it? You meet some couples in particular who just seem to play stupid little power games with one another; they fuck with each other's heads and you don't really know why they're together, because they seem to cause each other more pain than anything else. So maybe the drugs just magnify it and bring it all to a head." (Female 34; 18 years experience.)

So these intense levels of chemical intimacy can have a down side too them if people aren't careful. They can create relationships that are too reliant upon drugs and too introverted, to the point where they become stagnant and destructive. However, as this informant points out this may well be a property of certain relationships rather than necessarily a property of the drugs; the inclusion of drugs simply intensifies the whole social cycle and exaggerates the internal dynamic of the relationship. People can engage in such behaviour and fail to recognise these social patterns without drugs and problems can arise in relationships just because people spend too long around one another without a break. The other groups I

spoke to didn't live together; they met up a few times a week, but also had very distinct and separate lives at other points. They got together for a good time, rather than living together and that stopped it all becoming too "incestuous" and "claustrophobic". More importantly, they didn't need to be completely "out of it" to enjoy each other's company and they were aware that they had changed over time. As one informant explained:

"My group of friends are all quite aware when we're slipping into repetition and everybody starts breaking out and escaping a bit; they get a bit of space from one another. Everyone is now aware that we've changed; we want different things, so when we throw another party we'll have to take that into consideration, but we're changing as a group and I haven't really experienced that as a group before, all slightly making things change, instead of having to leave the group in order to move on. Which is great because we're developing together." (Female 30; 11 years experience.)

Embodied Metaphors

We have begun looking at the notion of habitus, the realm of taken for granted knowledge and bodily practice, which combine to generate and constrain cultural ideas and relationships. Bourdieu makes no real attempt to explore how that habitus is constructed, in physical and cognitive terms, he simply brings our attention to its existence. As one of the main contentions of this study is that the experiences offered by clubbing can generate a point of slippage in the habitus it is necessary to explore how that habitus is constructed and experienced by both individuals and groups. In *"Metaphors We Live By"* (1980) George Lakoff and Mark Johnson explored the way that metaphors organised human speech and ideas, by creating systems of coherence amongst disparate ideas. For example, they looked at orientational metaphors such as "I'm feeling up today", as a way of describing happiness, and concluded that such metaphors have an embodied and experiential basis that grants them saliency, so "feeling up" is happy, while "feeling down" is sad. They claimed that:

"In actuality we feel that no metaphor can ever be comprehended or even adequately represented independent of its experiential basis." (Lakoff and Johnson 1980:19)

I have included this reference to their work here because, like Bourdieu, Mauss, Damasio and Merleau-Ponty, it reveals that the body, as a permanent site of human reference in mind, plays a foundational role in constructing human knowledge about the world. We know our world as much through our bodily relationship to it, as we know it as a purely "mental" phenomena grounded in ideas about that world. In *"Women, Fire and Dangerous Things"* (1987) Lakoff expanded on this work, his ideas were subsequently used by Brad Shore, in

his book "*Culture in Mind*" (1996), to explore the way in which cultural worlds are both represented and known by those who occupy them.

Shore's work is exceptionally rich, dense and complex and I wish to deal with only a number of the claims and ideas laid out in it. In particular the notion of idealised cognitive models, which Lakoff utilised to account for a number of different mechanisms by which people make sense of their worlds. An idealised cognitive model (I.C.M.) is a form of mental and bodily schema through which knowledge of the world is mediated. Lakoff suggested 5 varieties of I.C.M.s: propositional models, kinaesthetic image schemas, metaphors, metonyms and symbolic models. In terms of this study I want explore kinaesthetic image schemas, which Shore classes as:

"Kinesthetic schemas model an individual's relationship to the immediate environment through conventions affecting posture, interpersonal space, and muscle tone. Bowing, sitting, walking, and even sleeping are often highly stylized through kinesthetic cultural models and convey important cultural information about status, mood, and relationship." (Shore 1996:59-60)

Part of these schema is made up of "emotional models", which Shore defines as:

"*Emotion models* have been generally studied as linguistic models...the dynamic feeling states associated with conventional emotions have not received the same kind of attention....These bodily states are also subject to cultural modeling and would fall under the general rubric of "kinesthetic schemas." The most elaborated and self-conscious kinesthetic schemas are associated with dance." (Ibid.:60)

I must stress at this point that I see a huge overlap between Shore's description of kinaesthetic schema and Mauss's notion of bodily techniques. I also see a connection between the concept of idealised cognitive models and Bourdieu's conception of habitus. For me they are different aspects of the same general idea. When dealing with the notion of ICMs we must recognise that:

"Many ICMs evidence "prototype effects" in that they make possible categorization in terms of relative goodness of fit rather than absolute identification....Prototype effects such as these account for the "fuzzy" nature of much classification." (Shore 1996:333-334)

The basic idea then is that each culture is represented in the minds of individuals and groups, through a series of overlapping physical and mental models which combine as a type of "taken for granted knowledge" to use Bourdieu's terminology. All these models are embodied and they provide the bedrock upon which our relationship to the world is both felt by a person and known in mind. These models do not always generate perfect "fits", but rather work by generating similitude across different fields of action.

I now want to examine the following statement made by one of my informants:

“The first time I took speed was the first time in my life that I felt truly confident. I remember it was ‘pink champagne’, lovely whizz and I couldn’t shut up. Before that I was very shy, very quiet and I remember that for the next few days I was thinking, ‘That’s how it feels to be confident and that’s what I need to do; I need to learn how to feel that way without the drugs.’ What’s been really nice is that, in terms of slowing down over the last few months, I recognise there are other things that I learnt, about having a good time, that I’ve managed to carry over from partying without the drugs being present. Very positive on the whole.” (Female 32; 9 years experience.)

I would argue that this women’s experience of confidence made the idea of confidence more tangible to her. It gave her a model through which she could comprehend confidence, which had ceased to be something she wasn’t and instead became something she had experienced as a social actuality. She had given herself an embodied and experiential basis from where she could view her shyness as only one possible social state. This model was given meaning through its relation to her bodily practice; she had begun to comprehend confidence through her own bodily experience that was encountered through drugs. I would argue that this experience was predominantly physical and emotional, in that amphetamine changes the body, and this change subsequently alters a person’s emotions in relation to the set and setting of the environment in which it occurred. It was through this novel body and novel emotional state that she began to socialise and experience a sense of confidence. I would suggest that clubbing, as a non everyday and non mundane sensual practice, grants people access to alternative embodied states that alter their experience of inhabiting their world.

Clubbing has produced its own language particularly in relation to the club intoxicants some of which are strongly related to the bodily metaphors explored by Lakoff and Johnson, such as the “getting high”, “coming down” classifications surrounding drugs. Even the street names of the drugs themselves, speed, ecstasy, trips, etc. are metaphors based upon their effects. However, I am more interested in the socio-sensual states that arise during clubbing, and the way they provide their own embodied models of social behaviour. Many of these socio-sensual effects have no linguistic counterparts; intoxicatory metaphors tend to relate to the drugs simple effects rather than the more complex interactions that occur while on them. (Except for ecstasy which creates “loved up” crowds, a further illustration of its social power.)

The same informant continued in answer to my question, “Has clubbing changed the way you interact with people?”

“Something has. The classic example is me going on a course for work. I have to go on these courses and I used to hate them. I didn’t know anybody and I’d feel like I had to make conversation with people. I dreaded the breaks and the lunchtimes wondering where you were going to be; had you met anybody to be friends with, are you going to sit and be the sad one on your own. Now I went on a weeks course recently and it’s not even that I find one person to link to, which is what I would’ve done before, I didn’t do that at all; I just happily bounced around and met loads and loads of people and every break and every lunchtime I’d find someone else to spend my time with and so at the end of the course I’d met most of the people there. That’s really different to how I used to be. It was a far clubbier way of interacting.” (Female 32; 9 years experience.)

We have here a model of social interaction that has no specific label in language. It is a socio-sensual practice that was discovered through clubbing and then shifted beyond the club arena. Note my informant doesn’t mention the phrase “loved up”, so it’s not that intense club experience which she is referring to, rather the clubbing model of social interaction gave her a more general “prototype” for her social relations in the outside world. Her experience is derived from a number of bodily and emotional relationships with other people, that she feels has been changed through clubbing.

We should also note that my informant’s behaviour on these courses was not due to her taking drugs and in response to my question, “Your job must teach you to interact with people though?” she replied:

“Yes obviously that and age makes a difference, but I’d already been in the job 4 years, before I started doing the clubbing and drugging thing, rather than just boozing and dancing, and I hadn’t developed the confidence I’ve now got from the job alone. Certainly, now at work I’m being asked to apply for the team leader post and 3 to 4 years ago I would never have dreamt of doing that and they wouldn’t have thought of asking me.” (Female 32; 9 years experience.)

My informant’s experience had changed the kinaesthetic image schema and her emotional model of what it felt like to socialise. She had experienced and practiced a new ideal of social interaction. Note the term “bounced around”-it gives an up-beat impression of the way in which she approached people and the body through which she made that approach. Bouncing around certainly doesn’t sound in the least bit threatening and it reveals a certain enthusiasm for socialising, which is far removed from the withdrawn physicality often associated with shyness. I must stress that my informant had recognised the role played by her intoxication in allowing her to experience this social state, but she makes it clear she

understood that relying on intoxication, to keep re-creating this embodied state, was not going to be an option. It had given her something to work towards, a socio-sensual model that she would eventually carry beyond the club space without the use of intoxicants.

As a further example I want to examine this next informant's statement that:

"Clubbing is a bit like taking Psychedelic drugs; it's not the same thing, but psychedelics are powerful tools, once you've taken them they affect you for the rest of your life. The rest of your life you know that there is something else, another type of experience out there; you've walked over the meadow and you know what the other side feels like. What you make of it after that is up to you, but it does stay with you. Clubbings a bit like that; it lets you know that there is another way of having a good time with people, something more intense." (Male 32; 14 years experience.)

By drawing an analogy to psychedelic drugs this informant reveals the powerful effects that clubbing can have and the way it changes your relationship to the wider world. For example I know of one successful artist, who took LSD some 30 years ago and hasn't taken it since, who still utilises the insights the experience gave him, into the power of colour, in his work. The model of social relations, that we explored in the above section on chemical intimacy, becomes the model of how social relations can and should feel at an embodied level. Once again I would suggest that this model is as much a kinaesthetic image schema, as it is a direct effect of intoxication. Over time it becomes part of the body, a particular physical and emotional relationship between people that they value, because of the way it feels different from other social experiences in the everyday world with both friends and strangers alike.

This model is not the primary social model utilised in the everyday world, neither is it simply a consequence of taking drugs. As the next informant indicates:

"Clubbing offers you the chance to do the right thing by people, to treat them properly without having to worry about getting shafted or taken advantage of for behaving like that" (Female 41; 19 years experience.)

So there is at least a proportion of this clubbing sociality that is based upon a desire to treat people well and enjoy them, but this desire is tempered, in the everyday world, by a fear that it will allow people to believe that they can take advantage of you. Through clubbing people can experience this social desire as an embodied actuality, not all the time, but often enough to make it a tangible social reality. As the next informant points out:

"People being shitty happens so rarely in clubs that it feels like a safe learning environment. Some people would say that it's the context and that you can't carry it over into other situations, but for me that's certainly not the case. I don't expect everyone to be nice in the outside world. I'm not a rude person anyway and when I'm off my head the last thing I want to do is to be rude to someone and you learn how to handle people and situations in

a much more pleasant way. You learn how to use body language more effectively especially with the guys, who come up to you on the dancefloor, you learn how to deal with them and I've only ever had to tell one of them to fuck-off outright, because he couldn't take a hint." (Female 32; 9 years experience.)

We take socialising for granted, but like any other skill we improve our social skills by practice, and clubs offer people a "safe" environment in which to practice a particular form of social interaction, that feels closer to how they want to interact with people, than many of the social encounters they have in the everyday world. From my experience of meeting my informants I would suggest that the social model you experience in clubs is then dampened and withdrawn in the everyday world. Until, that is, people get to know you better in the everyday world, then it starts to reappear in situations that aren't based around intoxication. The clubbing model exists, but my informants had all realised that it wasn't applicable in all social situations with all people and so they utilised it only in certain relationships and situations where it felt appropriate.

Sensual Morality

"You know when somebody doesn't club they have a different idea of morality. In some ways clubbers have their own morality, which is just as valid, and people seem to be more open minded and tolerant, not tolerant, that doesn't really come into it, they just give each other the space to be themselves." (Female 32; 9 years experience.)

The morality of clubbing is not really articulated as a set of ideas. It is a morality that is derived from the socio-sensual practice of clubbing. It is more a moral sensibility than a moral philosophy. Certain moral perspectives that exist in the everyday world, such as people's attitude towards sex and drugs, are gradually challenged through the practices of clubbing. The bodily boundaries of our habitus: the British, Protestant, Christian moral stance, that still suffuses our culture's perspective upon pleasure and particularly bodily pleasure, cannot account for socio-sensual experiences that lie outside of their accepted parameters. This everyday morality is not sufficient to make sense of the sensual experiences people are having through clubbing, because this morality can only condemn people's experiences, but because these experiences feel so good people resist these everyday interpretations. However, clubbers rarely shout their opposition to these everyday moral perspectives instead they just challenge them through practice.

This is more of a process of sensual de-problematisation than a counter morality. So for example in the everyday world sex is still linked to the moral frameworks of the past, whereas my informants treated it as a sensual adventure. As this informant illustrated:

“My man and I sat down and wrote out a list of all the things we’d like to do sexually and even included some things we weren’t sure about like water-sports, just so we’d give them a go and we’ve been working our way through it. It’s great, we’ve discovered a lot. Having a list and just trusting one another and being really honest about our experiences opens up a whole world; it’s about experiencing these things and that list grants me a lot of freedom. It’s like giving myself permission to experiment and I’m finding I’m pushing myself further sexually just to see how far I can go, how much I can feel.” (Female 28; 9 years experience.)

This informant was traversing the sexual morality of the everyday world within a relationship that had a high degree of trust and honesty about sex. Sex ceases to be soiled by immorality and becomes a species of sensual knowledge, rather like intoxicants, that could be experimented with in order to intensify and alter the sensual parameters of this couples sexual practices. Obviously, people’s attitudes towards sex have been gradually changing for years; sex is spoken about in different ways now than it was even 20 years ago, but all this “speaking” of sex has the effect of making sex justify itself, as Foucault (1976) pointed out. This couple’s relationship was not so much based on making sex “speak”, but was more in line with Elizabeth Grosz’s suggestion in *“Space, Time and Perversion”*:

“Rather, it is a refusal to link sexual pleasure with the struggle for freedom, the refusal to validate sexuality in terms of a greater cause or a higher purpose (whether political, spiritual, or reproductive), the desire to enjoy, to experience, to make pleasure for its own sake, for where it takes us, for how it changes and makes us, to see it as one but not the only trajectory or direction in the lives of sexed bodies.” (Grosz 1995:227)

My informants are not ‘speaking’ sex; they are simply getting on with it and by doing so they cut through the world of discourse and replace it with actual sensual practice. They challenged the morality through which the everyday world attempts to classify and label sexual practices as good or bad, because, as a shared sensual adventure sexual acts became “moral” through the level of honesty and trust which suffused their relationship. My informant’s sense of sharing a mutual adventure reflects back on the notion of a gendered equality arising in relation to sensual practice and nullifies the presumption of domination or submission, which exists in a great deal of the discourse and rhetoric that surrounds sex.

Sensual practice creates an alternative experiential platform from where the moral discourses of the everyday world can be viewed from a contrary perspective. People

distance themselves from that discourse, at a sensual level, and that discourse ceases to “stick” to their bodies with the same emotional force. I would argue that clubbing has played a huge role in creating this level of sensual alterity, which begins to manifest itself as a moral sensibility, because it is grounded in the social practices that arise from clubbing. I would argue that the sexual experiment set out above grew out of the socio-sensual practices of clubbing and the levels of intimacy and trust that people experience through sharing drugs with one another, both inside and beyond the club space.

The sensual intensity experienced via the bodily practices of clubbing can change people’s own relationship to their bodies, as they begin to understand that this sensual realm can be explored like any other realm of knowledge. Clubbing can initiate this shift in perspective by deepening people’s experience of the ecstatic and Dionysian rush of this sensual realm. As one informant suggested:

“Most people’s morality is simply mental laziness, anything that defines how you could be living abdicates you from the responsibility of deciding how you should be living.” (Male 32: 14 years experience.)

Conclusion

Clubs offer an alternative socio-sensual environment that is grounded in a process of radical sensual intensification, which underpins an alternative set of social experiences, that feel very different from the everyday social practice lodged in the habitus of our culture. Over time these experiences have become democratised; they have become mainstream. The percentage of young people in this country, who have encountered them, is growing rapidly, as is the amount of people who have continued clubbing and made it part of their adult lives. Clubs have initiated a process of sensual change, largely bereft of a specific overarching ideology, and these changes are part on an on-going process that is still being worked out on the ground. Different groups use this sensual shift in different ways; they mould these experiences into a social form that suits their needs and desires. They are felt most intensely within the social relationships that make up an important part of the experience of clubbing. Whether interacting with strangers or hanging out with friends, the sensual charge of clubbing reverberates within and radically alters the form and depth of these social encounters. This is not an un-problematic process; it has its dangers, but it also has its rewards and my informants viewed those rewards as worth the potential risks they were taking.

The bodily techniques people encounter, via clubbing, can escape the confines of the club space and can be woven into people's social practice in the everyday world. They grant them new perspectives upon that world, that challenges the embodied logic of the habitus. This is particularly evident in notions of intimacy, gender relations and a shift in people's moral perspective upon sensual pleasure, all these things are not entirely down to clubbing, they are also part of the social changes occurring in the wider everyday world. Clubbing simply provided an arena that allowed these wider ideas to become experienced as socio-sensual actualities; they were embodied and this process of embodiment created its own logic of practice, that in turn generated a wider shift in social perspective amongst clubbers.

Sensual Culture

“Sometimes I think. Sometimes I am” Paul Valery (Quoted in D.Dennet: 1993:423)

“Time and space, percussion and bass, the whole world’s moving at a blinding pace, life’s a card game, trying to hold the ace, we might get erased in this great paper chase.” (Us 3: Broadway and 52nd)

Dionysus and Apollo

Nietzsche suggested a central opposition in human nature and human relations to their own society, which he examined by utilising the concepts of Dionysus and Apollo. As Bryan Turner explains:

“Apollo stands for the principles of formalism, rationalism and consistency while Dionysus stands for the realities of ecstasy, fantasy, excess and sensuality...Nietzsche argued that it was only through the reconciliation of these two dimensions that human beings could achieve any real balance in their lives, namely through the reconciliation of art and existence.” (Turner 1996:18-19)

If he’d got out more Nietzsche would have loved night-clubs. For the actuality of clubbing’s practice is, as we have seen, deeply Dionysian, yet they are also social spaces, controlled and ordered, both externally through the structure of the club space and internally as an emotional and sensual contract with the night, shared by participants, which allows Dionysus to arise within the crowd.

As I have shown, by entering these Dionysian spaces my informants began discovering alternate bodies, alternate social selves, new forms of intimacy, new experiences and new embodied metaphors that they valued. Yet the legacy of Apollo still exists in relation to these discoveries because, although no longer immoral, they are still denied any redeeming social value by the wider social world. They are dismissed by the mainstream as hedonistic and escapist, but are experienced as hyper-real moments of sublime socio-sensual intensity that can, in themselves, grant people a lived sense of meaningful attachment to their worlds. This is the meaningfulness of practice; it is not an idea; it is a particular form of social and sensual knowledge that resides in the body; it is a lived reality rather than an ideological position and it must be created and recreated night after night.

There has been a gradual shift in the sensual parameters of Western experience, that is the knowledge of how the body can be made to feel and how those feelings can be utilised as a

social force. The bodily constraints imposed by the habitus, the taken for granted limits of our sensual experience, has been challenged by a combination of forces. The rediscovery of the body, through dance, music, chemistry, sex and socialising has been an on-going project; it existed before clubbing, but clubbing gave it a public home.

The work of Norbert Elias offers a more historical perspective upon Nietzsche's theoretical distinction between Dionysus and Apollo. Elias examines the gradual process of creating "civilised bodies" and his work charts the shift between the largely unregulated and uncontrolled body of the Middle Ages, that freely expressed its "drives", "desires" and "violence", to the controlled and mannered body of the Renaissance period. Chris Shilling sums up this shift:

"In contrast to the violence and lack of prohibitions on behaviour which characterized the Middle Ages, the Renaissance onwards witnessed a long-term trend towards greater demands on emotional control and the rise of differentiated codes of body management." (Shilling 1993:154)

The complex courtly etiquette of the Renaissance period created more controlled bodies that were especially concerned with their own self representation in the world as a way of creating social distinction which:

"enforces a curbing of the affects in favour of calculated and finely shaded behaviour in dealing with people" (Elias quoted in Shilling 1993:158)

Shilling suggest that these bodies were rationalised to a far higher degree than previously and that this rationalisation has been on-going ever since this Renaissance period. I would contend that this process reveals the growing influence of the Apollonian body in opposition to the Dionysian body. I must stress that the use of the term "civilising" does not suggest that this new Western body was in any way superior to the forms of bodily practice found in other societies but to simply contrast Western bodily practices to each other over time.

One major element in this process was related to the reduction of physical violence which led to:

"A gradual decline in people's propensity for obtaining pleasure directly from violence, a lowering of the threshold of moral repugnance concerning violent acts, and a decrease in the swings and fluctuations in people's behaviour." (Shilling 1993:156)

This growing stress on bodily control has obvious social advantages but can also decrease the levels of excitement and passion people experience and share in their lives. The internalisation of the realm of emotions and desires can create a situation where this bodily control is experienced negatively so that:

“The battlefield is...moved within..the drives, the passionate affects, that can no longer directly manifest themselves in the relationships *between* people, often struggle no less violently *within* the individual against this supervising part of himself.” (Elias quoted in Shilling 1993:165)

However, I would suggest that as direct displays of emotional violence and passion became less acceptable people became more devious in their social negotiations, which allowed them alternate ways to unleash their emotions, that are more guarded but no less painful for the recipient. This side of the “civilising process” results in viciousness and cruelty becoming more covert, controlled and calculated rather than disappearing completely. They become “head games” rather than bodily confrontations; the office bully, being a primary example, can wage psychological war on people for years.

My informants did not refer to the everyday world as a “civilised” world but rather a world of “petty power games” and “bullshit office politics”. Instead of the visible immediacy and carnality of violence these more covert forms of power play impact in the same ways as water-torture, a constant drip, drip, drip, the effects of which increase in severity over time. Although actual physical violence may well have decreased, from the levels found in the Middle Ages, people’s perception that they live in increasingly violent times, which the contemporary media plays a huge role in constructing, suffuses their social perspective and strongly influences the way they negotiate the social space of the city.

Nevertheless I would largely agree with Elias’s perspective: the body has become more controlled and regulated in the modern world and further I would agree with Shilling (1993) that this gradual process of rationalisation has become a major part of the Western habitus. Moreover the “civilising process” can alter people’s perspective upon behaviours that once existed outside of its structuring logic. A process Shilling hints at when he says:

“Waves of formalization and informalization also complicate the development of civilized bodies. For example, the 1960s has often been seen as a period when emotional restraints were cast off in favour of spontaneous self-expression. However, Wouters (1986, 1987) argues that this and comparable periods can more accurately be seen as a time when a highly controlled decontrolling of emotions took place. For the social informalities and personal experimentation of the period to work, a high degree of self-restraint was required.” (Shilling 1993:169)

The drugs used in the 1960s played a huge role in shifting the emotional constraints of the time and that rather than seeing a “highly controlled decontrolling of emotions” we are instead witnessing an ordered body encountering novel emotional and physical states through the use of drugs. This “civilised” body was not seeking violence but a sense of

passion that could challenge its own sense of being constrained in the world. In the process people began to challenge the moral legitimacy of certain forms of emotional and bodily constraint; their drug experiences; their sexual encounters and the altered social forms, that allowed these experiences to be shared, created a new perspective upon the realm of bodily experience. People discovered that this Dionysian realm did not have to exist in opposition to the ordering and rationalising forces of Apollo, but could itself be rationalised to create alternate social and consensual forms of intense bodily and emotional experiences which they valued. The key factor was the lack of physical violence. These practices did not represent a deviation from the “civilising process” but rather a challenge to the moral parameters which surrounded bodily practices that were still tabooed, despite the fact that they could be carried out consensually. The fetish club scene offers an excellent example of how bodily display, sexual practices and even the administration and sharing of pain, all of which exist outside of the traditional realm of Apollonian order, can be “civilised” when placed within a mutually consensual, social framework.

Nevertheless the ideological and moralised split between Dionysus and Apollo, when viewed as ideas, is difficult to bridge because the habitus of our culture is grounded in the Apollonian perspective that provides our lived orientation in the world. However, clubbing is not an ideological matter; it is a bodily practice and as such it can overcome these ideological positions by fusing Dionysus and Apollo into the same body. My informants were pragmatic about clubbing; they lived in both the everyday world and the world of clubs, so revealing that the presence of Dionysus was not necessarily a socially destructive, disordering force. Not only could they embody this idea in the club space, and turn the passionate sensual intensity of Dionysus into a shared social form, which in itself altered the way they encountered and negotiated this social realm, they could also support themselves in the everyday world. The bodily practice found within the realm of Dionysus is in itself exhausting; a fact my informants discovered through their own excesses. It was through these excesses that they discovered a need for the Apollonian realm of order; time to recoup their energy and become part of the everyday world again. Over the years their clubbing practice had changed; it became mediated by the needs of their own bodies, but in recognising this mediatory point they have brought Dionysus and Apollo into alignment and the relationship between the two is lived as a movement between alternate experiences of inhabiting their own world.

Sensually Creative Identities

This socio-sensual shift is particularly interesting in relation to the construction of identity within the contemporary Western world. Shilling suggests that:

“In traditional societies, identities were received automatically through ritual practices which connected people and their bodies to the reproduction of long established social positions. High modernity, though, makes self-identity *deliberative* (Lyotard, 1988). The self is no longer seen as a homogeneous, stable core which resides within the individual (Shils, 1981). Instead, identities are formed reflexively through the asking of questions and the continual reordering of self-narratives which have at their centre a concern with the body (Giddens, 1991). Self identity and the body become ‘reflexively organized projects’ which have to be sculpted from the complex plurality of choices offered by high modernity without moral guidance as to which should be selected.” (Shilling 1993:181)

The distinction Shilling makes between “traditional” and “modern” societies is overstated here, as it removes the possibility of resistance, negotiation and change in those “traditional” worlds and places them in an unsustainable category that presumes their similitude in opposition to “modern” societies. However, I would suggest that the way people experience their personal identity has changed at a phenomenological level, as social worlds became more complex and the presence of strangers more commonplace. The importance placed on the idea of individuality in the contemporary world adds to this experiential shift. This is interesting in relation to Elias’s and Shilling’s notion of “individualisation” which adds a historical dimension to the phenomenological experience of that individuality within the contemporary social world, which reveals that the way people experience their sense of individuality in relation to the world is itself socially constructed. As Shilling explains:

“Elias has no ontological commitment to the idea of a body and self which is completely separate and isolated. Instead, the body, emotions and physical expressions are themselves formed by civilizing processes made possible by symbol emancipation and forged out of social figurations. In particular, with the increased capacity for self-detachment and affect control which humans possess from the end of the Middle Ages, people come to perceive themselves more as individuals who are separate and detached from others. Objects also take on an appearance of externality and begin to possess meanings which are separate from the immediate use to which they are put by people. (Elias, 1983:252) in (Shilling 1993:166)

This quote suggests that the sense of detachment people experience, from the people and objects they encounter in the world, has arisen from the gradual process of “individualisation” that alters the way people experience their relationship to that world, which impacts upon the construction of their identity. The controlled, highly reflexive and

individuated identities examined by Elias and Shilling are expanded at a bodily level by people's immersion into the club space, because the club space allows for a greater degree of personal expressivity and experimentation than other public spaces and allows people to take "time out" from the everyday controlling gaze.

Identities can be pushed to the surface and expressed as people reveal their party selves and occupy their bodies to a more animated and communicative level, which grants them a sense of having been liberated from the social and sensual constraints that surround the "presentation of self" in the everyday world. These experiences are accumulative; they build within the body as people gain more confidence in the club space; how far this window of opportunity is pushed depends upon the clubbers themselves. For some the sense of alterity uncovered through the practice of clubbing is different enough to satisfy their desires. For others that sense of alterity becomes a point of departure from the constraints of the everyday world, which allows them to not only experience a feeling of liberation but to develop upon and explore the properties of this liberated self and so expand upon the sensual and expressive parameters of their lived identity. The construction of identity becomes an on-going, creative project aimed towards the creation of a sense of personal and social authenticity.

The self that is created through the participatory and social process of clubbing is not primarily an ideological or philosophical self; it is rather an embodied self: one which manipulates its own social, sensual and emotional experiences of the world in order to locate itself in that world at a deeply embodied level. I would contend that, as a practice, the experience of clubbing impacts most forcefully upon the unconscious structure which Damasio calls the proto-self; which is the biological and social mechanisms that exist outside of conscious awareness and introspective control, but nevertheless play a profound role in shaping our perspective upon and experience of the world. In relation to this study I would suggest there are at least three systems that structure humans' experience of and relationship to their worlds at an unconscious level. The first is the material and tangible connection to the present which Damasio calls the proto-self. The second is Bourdieu's habitus. The third is the unconscious aspect of the emotional memory system. I will discuss this third aspect later in this chapter. At this point I want to concentrate on the habitus.

The bodily practice of clubbing throws the habitus into relief and allows people to move beyond its structuring logic as people alter the way they feel at a sensual and emotional level in the world; the structuring influence of the habitus is diminished and this process allows people access to knowledge that was once denied them by their own emotional reaction to

those ideas or objects. Consider this example from Matthew Collin's excellent book about the history of ecstasy and clubs "*Altered States*":

"Well I had a little magic tablet, and I fucking just fwooor.... it was a yellow burger and it tasted like pepper and it fucking knocked me. I'd heard all about this ecstasy, I'm getting a guy coming up to me, used to be one of my close pub mates, who's now wearing an orange fucking shirt, a Smiley bandanna, only got half his teeth in his head, telling me how much of a good time he's had down King's Cross. I'm thinking, three months ago you were down with me at the Thomas A'Beckett getting lagging, I wondered why I hadn't seen you for a little while. I remember this yellow burger, I took it, I walked around, and then I got this feeling from the tip of my toes to the top of my head - like this burning rocket fuel - and I got scared because I wasn't used to the buzz, three pints of lager I could handle but an E, I didn't have a clue....I remember literally running to a wall, and it had nothing to hang on to, and I just slid slowly down. I was running round this fucking place with my shirt inside out, shouting 'I'm on one!' because I'd fathomed it out, and everybody was shouting 'mental!' and clapping their hands - I fucking loved it man! This girl came up to me and said: 'Wouldn't it be good if the whole world was on E?' She was sweating it, I was pissing sweat - I didn't know what was going on - and all I could think of was: 'Yeah, you're so right love.' And this is so unlike me. I came out of there in the morning, and I just sat in a car in Peckham all day, just watching people - I was just karma'd, I couldn't believe what had happened to my body. I've got a big blue lion tattooed on my arm, and MFC on my arm, like a mug - I used to go to Millwall when it was the Den - I had to spit at a pig, I had to call a guy a Paki because monkey see, monkey do; it was Neanderthal man going down the Den, it was programmed. E changed my life completely - if I saw you walking down the street and you were from north London and I was from south London we would supposedly have to have a scuffle, which is bollocks, but we all lived by that, we didn't know no better. You couldn't get east, south, west and north London kids in the same warehouse without having a fight - you're fucking asking for miracles to happen, and you didn't get miracles in the eighties - but you did with the miracle drug." (Collins 1997:121-122)

This experience illustrates the way this sudden unravelling of habitus can have a profound effect on people. The ecstasy and the "set and setting" of the club environment generated a socio-sensual state from within which his past ideas became disembodied and emotionally untenable. The Apollonian world would deny this powerful and positive experience any meaning because it took a drug to bring this revelation about, but it was obviously so intense that it challenged this man's entire perception of himself and his world and changed his life. Through dislodging the structuring logic of the habitus from his body and so moving beyond its "programming" he reconstructed the sensual connection between himself and his world and subsequently the ideas he had about that world. This process throws light on the following informant's response to my question: "Is clubbing escapist?"

“On the contrary it is reality; it is the real world that’s fake. Clubs allow you to experience unity, to celebrate it, to have respect for it. However, this is a unity which is amplified through individuality. I don’t want people to get into the clubbing and watching tele pattern, that’s escapism. I want them to learn from clubbing and to use what they’ve learnt creatively.” (Male 33; 20 years experience.)

This informant is suggesting that the altered socio-sensual practices found in the club space are a type of knowledge which people can learn from and subsequently shift back out into their everyday world if they are willing to utilise them creatively in that world. Through entering the club space people experience a sense of freedom but we must be careful when dealing with the notion of freedom, in relation to the club environment, as one promoter explained to me early on during this study:

“I don’t think people who are working all week and go out on the weekend - meet a mate in a pub, have a few beers, go to a club, have a few more drinks and whatever drug is available and then get a cab home - I don’t think they see it in terms of freedom. It’s part of getting nuttered; it’s a basic sense of freedom, but I don’t think they would write it down as freedom. They don’t realise it’s something they can do with their time and their life, but they wouldn’t label it as freedom. They would label it as getting NUTTERED. A sense of not worrying about things and when you’re standing in the middle of a dance floor sweating your arse off that’s how you feel.” (Male 27; 11 years experience.)

The freedom found in clubs is more akin to “letting your hair down” than an act of revolutionary resistance, yet people value this experience, they desire it. So when we speak of freedom in clubs we must think of it as a sensual state that arises from a liberated body and an altered style of social interaction. However, even this temporary sense of freedom can, even if it doesn’t always, alter people’s perspectives upon their own lives.

In *“Fear of Freedom”* (1942), Erich Fromm makes a distinction between the notions of “freedom from” and “freedom to”. “Freedom from” relates to the process of political change, the overcoming of tyranny. “Freedom to” is a more subtle construct it relates to people’s ability to actually recognise and seize the freedoms they have won, but which the habitus of their own culture may still conceal from view, by keeping them outside of practice. As Fromm suggests:

“Modern man seems, if anything, to have too many wishes and his only problem seems to be that, although he knows what he wants, he cannot have it. All our energy is spent for the purpose of getting what we want, and most people never question the premise of this activity: that they know their true wants. They do not stop to think whether the aims they are pursuing are something they themselves want.” (Fromm 1942:217)

At an ideological level the Western world prides itself on the levels of freedom enjoyed by its citizens but Bourdieu has shown us how the bodies of those citizens are constructed by society; they carry within them the sensual and ideological limits of that society and they are predisposed to reconstruct the social world in which they are immersed. Yet we live in a world that, on an ideological level, sets great store in the notion of freedom, but in practice this translates into the freedom to reproduce a particular form of socio-sensual order and the freedom to buy what we want.

The shift in habitus, that can arise from clubbing, can alter people's perception of what they actually want from the world by allowing them to glimpse alternative "wants" and so re-order their perception of self and their identity in relation to these newly discovered "wants". Rather than in relation to the wants, desires and socially sanctioned trajectories which reside in the habitus. In relation to clubbing these new "wants" are in themselves sensual modalities in that they arise out of the knowledge of how people want their worlds, their relationships, their jobs, their lives to feel at an embodied level. My informants had then set about creating worlds which fulfilled these "wants" and desires. Moreover the socio-sensual practices of clubbing had the ability to generate their own meaning for punters which suffused the new perspectives and practices they had discovered, via clubbing, and allowed them to withstand the condemnatory gaze of the everyday Apollonian world.

This process of constructing identities in relation to how the world feels and building upon these embodied feelings does not preclude consumption, but it can alter people's relation to that consumption. The most common tools people use to create identity in the contemporary world are consumer goods; the labels and brands of the consumer world generate instant symbols through which people mark themselves out in the world, but these symbols are themselves in a constant state of flux, moving in and out of fashion, creating temporary symbolic facades which must then be emotionally occupied if they are to gain any embodied depth. It is no longer enough to wear "Nike" but you must become "Nike", which as Naomi Klein points out so beautifully in *No Logo* (2000) involves adopting the aspirational philosophies and lifestyle perspectives of your chosen brand.

The symbolic mechanism that is at work here is the same in our society as in "traditional" societies; social worlds have always provided identificatory symbols, totems being a prime example. What is different is the structuring logic of the habitus which naturalised these points of identification in "traditional" societies and suffused them with a lived, taken for granted certainty, that allowed them to hold their meanings for far longer than the symbols of the contemporary world, so keeping confusion and uncertainty in check. Whereas in

“modern” societies the symbolic power of consumer goods is in a constant state of flux that largely precludes long term identificational stability. This is problematic in relation to the idea of individuation, as the pressure is more and more upon the individual to create their own identity in the world. Consumer goods create temporary identities and symbols of group belonging in the world, which can evaporate as swiftly as they arose because of the vagaries of fashion. One minute you’re in, the next you’re out and the symbolic distinctions used to articulate both group allegiance and individual identity can never provide the sort of embodied depth or permanence of a “traditional” totem. So although people can be passionate about the brands they wear, they can also be fickle in those passions, jumping from brand to brand as fashion or personal taste changes.

Clubbing can influence this process in two ways. Firstly, the shift to judging the world in terms of how it feels can throw new light on the whole range of consumer symbols because people are already located in the world at a sensual and meaningful level. The need to utilise this symbolic realm of consumer goods, to create and articulate identities, diminishes. Secondly, even when people don’t disconnect themselves from these consumer distinctions, clubbing can provide an arena in which those consumer symbols can be suffused with the embodied actuality of clubbing’s practice. They become symbols lived rather than simply symbols worn and this process suffuses those symbols with an extra embodied saliency. They are granted meaning, via the practice of inhabiting them, which creates potent experiences of social, sensual and emotional participation, that generates a fleshy third dimension to the meanings held within the symbol itself. The practice of clubbing creates the bodily structure of meaning, the non-linguistic sense of meaningfulness, that can be attached to a multitude of different social perspectives and lifestyles suffusing them with a passion that no consumer object could unleash and sustain on its own. In order to understand how it can achieve this we must turn to the realm of ritual.

Ritual Bodies.

“This is my church, this is my church, for tonight, God is a D.J.” (Faithless: God is a DJ)

Clubbing possesses some of the social and bodily properties that anthropology has examined in relation to ritual, so in the next section I want to compare and contrast the world of clubbing and the world of ritual to see what it can tell us about clubbing. There is a huge

corpus of work about ritual in anthropology, but I want to examine one small aspect of that work. Namely the role played by the bodily practice of ritual in underpinning the cosmology towards which those rituals are aimed. It is my contention that the socio-sensual realm of the body has the ability to create its own lived sense of meaningfulness, at an emotional and corporeal level, and that it is this physical and intense property of the body which plays an important role in constructing the meaning of rituals. I am taking this short diversion, because I want to show how bodies can hold a sense of meaningfulness, even when that lived sense is denied any importance from the world outside, of the experience itself.

The brain processes the world in two ways, as explained by LeDoux:

“This influence of memory on perceptions is an example of what cognitive scientists sometimes call top-down processing, which contrasts with the build-up of perceptions from sensory processing, known as bottom-up processing.” (LeDoux 1998:272)

The idea of bottom-up processing is crucial to my argument because clubs are made from the feet up via the bodily and social alterations I have already examined. The physical and emotional alternations, that occur to clubbers, are notable because of their intensity. They provide a sublime sense of connection to the world and to other people that is experienced as a radical shift in people’s sense of being-in-the-world. The greatest part of this process is the remaking of bodies through a gradual process of socio-sensual intensification; this occurs from the bottom-up through intoxication, dancing, music etc.; people create the body of the party and a party state of mind arises from within this body. They then begin to engage with the club space at a social level and they experience this sociality as radically different from their social experiences in other spaces. We have previously discussed how strangers become less threatening; friends more passionate and expressive, at a bodily and experiential level a sense of meaningfulness has already been created; people are passionately and emotionally engaged with their own social world. As one informant said;

“It’s funny you’re surrounded by strangers, but you feel this sense of unity with them, that you just don’t get anywhere else.” (Female 35; 18 years experience.)

Much of this sense of unity arises from a diminishment of fear, as I have discussed previously; you don’t know these people, but you are all part of the same night, the same experience, and you are seeking out the same goal of pleasure. This, if you like, is the cosmology of clubbing: the search for a shared experience of social pleasure that you can feel in your guts as an emotional actuality.

In some rituals the sensual parameters of everyday life are also altered and this process is used to underpin people's experience of the spiritual, to make it a tangible and material force within the body of participants. These are liminal states, to utilise Victor Turner's phrase, who suggests that they arise from experiencing a socially legitimated anti-structure which involves:

"The dissolution of normative social structure, with its role-sets, statuses, jural rights and duties." (V.Turner 1982:28)

This resulting state of liminality:

"...is both more creative and more destructive than the structural norm." (ibid.:47)

This is the social construction of a radical sensual and symbolic alterity to mark out particular points in culture as special or transitional. Cultures can utilise these experiential properties to re-create themselves and grant a sense of meaningfulness to people's passage through and occupation of their own culture, by first distancing and then reincorporating them into that culture. There is nothing inherently resistant about this shift into an alternate socio-sensual realm because they are carefully managed by society. Moreover they are often crucial to the reproduction of that society. Clubbing exists in a grey area, as a business it is legitimate, as a bodily space it is problematised because of its Dionysian qualities. It is, in itself, a liminal-like state; the experiences it houses can grant meaning to a plethora of different social perspectives.

For many years the academic analysis of ritual tended to look for meaning through the analysis of symbols, with the presumption that a knowledge of this symbolic significance provides the meaning of a ritual. Yet as Jack Goody revealed in his analysis of coronation rituals:

"The central meaning for the spectators lies at a fairly simple level; they too need an explanation of the sceptre and the orb, let alone the fine rainments preserved in the crypt." (Moore and Meyerhoff 1972:31)

If the meaning of ritual isn't held in symbols if, as Goody further suggests,:

"The situation is of course affected by the way in which "occasions" are communicated (the nature of the media), but the relative superficiality of such communication is not to be entirely derived from the mass audience or the rapidity of change. It is intrinsic to the nature of ritual and it gives rise to different interpretations by the actors (exegesis) as well as the observers (sociology)." (ibid.:31)

This capacity for rituals to be understood in different ways, by the people involved, suggests the presence of a sense of meaning prior to any interpretation. More recent

analysis of ritual have taken a more embodied and practice based perspective. In "*Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*" Catherine Bell suggested that:

"A ritualised body is a body invested with a "sense" of ritual" (Bell 1992:98) and that:

"Ritualisation is fundamentally a way of doing things to trigger the perception that these practices are distinct and that the associations they engender are special.....Ritualisation is not a matter of transmitting shared beliefs, instilling a dominant ideology as an internal subjectivity, or even providing participants with concepts to think with." (Bell 1992:220-221)

Bell's point is that ritual becomes a particular form of socio-sensual practice, marked out as special by the lived "sense" it makes to people; it deals not in concepts but in ways of engaging with and knowing the world at a profoundly embodied level.

This particular style of engaging with the world is deeply participatory; a term I have used throughout this work. My understanding of the notion of participation has been strongly influenced by the work of Edward L Schieffelin who suggested that:

"In the rituals I observed.....I found that mutual co-ordination, organisation and rhythmicity between the participants was possible even without everyone understanding what was going on. To the extent that co-ordinated practice became mutually shared and rhythmically synched, we achieved "participation": itself a mode of understanding and a new ground from which to move further." (Schieffelin: Per Com)

This participatory mode arises from the practice of creating something social: a conversation; a ritual; a good night out, together. That participation must be creative, but more than that it must be an emotional practice, in that the knowledge of having created something together, of being part of that something, impacts strongly upon the emotional memory of the participants. Participation is a mode of practice and at an emotional level participation is, itself, imbued with a sense of meaningfulness by the emotional quality of the action. Whether social events are experienced as deep points of participation or shallow points of participation will depend upon the emotional commitment that people experience in relation to the bodily practices they are engaged in and more importantly with one another.

Thus the ritualised body is predisposed to feel meaningful. It has already created the necessary socio-sensual and emotional states to feel located in the world as part of society and part of its cosmology. The fact that participants may have alternate interpretations of the event does not matter, because at an emotional and bodily level the job of ritual has already been done. Clubbing likewise creates these intense bodies and intense social experiences

that feel meaningful, but which are denied any redeeming social value from the perspective of the everyday world. Clubbers seem aware of this, one flyer described the night as:

“A blank slate waiting for someone to apply meaning.”

This flyer articulates a certain perspective upon clubbing e.g. that it feels more meaningful than the meanings which it is granted. That it could carry more meaning than it currently possesses. That it is imbued with a potentiality which arises from the practice of clubbing; a social-sensual-emotional potency the meaningfulness of which is devalued when placed back within the “trashy”, “hedonistic”, “superficial” world of contemporary capitalism. This lack of an ideological structure is also one of clubbing’s strengths; it allows people to make what they will of it, rather than be made by it and, as the same flyer itself suggests, this lack of specificity means:

“The experiment continues.”

The “experiment” is a shared exploration of the socio-sensual knowledge of Dionysus; it offers profound lived points of connection between self and world. It is also big fun, but the sense of actually enjoying your own life and enjoying other people, of having fun with them, is perceived as basically frivolous, by both the perspective of the everyday world and often by clubbers themselves. Which is strange because, as I have shown throughout this dissertation, having fun locates us in our social world and allows us to savour it. What could be more important than people creating shared social experiences across the fractured communities of the city? What could make more lived and embodied sense of the socio-sensual intensity of the urban environment? As one informant said:

“The only really good thing about London is the nightlife and for me that’s clubbing, without clubs this place would be an utter shithole to live in.”
(Male)

Clubbing makes sense of the city and its strangers, sense of people’s occupation of their own worlds and it does so by granting access to and gradually deepening participants’ knowledge of the same forms of bodily wisdom used to underpin some rituals. The sense it makes is sensual, rather than being created by the sharing of and devotion to specific ideological frameworks. It is the embodied sense of practice.

This practice is socially creative as it arises from sharing time and space with others, from within the sensually modified body of clubbing; it underpins a shift in clubbers’ perspective upon themselves and their own relationship to their social worlds. I must stress that this shift is not simply a product of clubbing, but is more closely related to the negotiations that occur between the socio-sensual knowledge offered via the club experience and the social and

economic position occupied by clubbers when away from the club space. The longer people club the greater the extent to which the altered club habitus becomes embodied by clubbers and the social and sensual perspectives that this club habitus underpins become part of clubbers' everyday world.

The "liminal" space of ritual houses an anti-structure, a term which Brian Sutton-Smith expanded upon when he suggested that:

"The normative structure represents the working equilibrium, the 'anti-structure' represents the latent system of potential alternatives from which novelty will arise when contingencies in the normative system require it. We might more correctly call this second system the *proto structural* system because it is the precursor of innovative normative forms. It is the source of new culture." (Brian Sutton-Smith in V.Turner 1982:28)

This split between the normative and anti-structures can be seen., in terms of Western culture, as mirroring the opposition between Apollo and Dionysus suggested by Nietzsche, which we examined at the beginning of this chapter. The experience of anti-structure temporarily dissolves the normative structure and generates the experience of "communitas"; the sense of social effervescence and connection which Victor Turner believes to be a vital part of the ritual experience, that binds ritual participants together at an emotional level. Victor Turner examined the ritual practices of the Ndembu and so the effects of these rituals were felt within a small scale society and not within the large scale metropolis I've been examining. In clubbing the sense of "communitas" or unity experienced by clubbers arises from enjoying themselves and enjoying other people. It can not provide the same kind of social cohesion to the wider normative structure that Victor Turner believes is an important part of the ritual process.

However, it is useful to focus on Sutton-Smith's assertion that the anti-structure is the source of new culture or more pertinently new practices, which have the potential to generate new perspectives upon the sociality of mainstream urban life by unravelling some aspects of the habitus, which orders that life and throws its taken for granted knowledge into relief. Sutton-Smith further asserts that:

"We may be disorderly in games....either because we have an overdose of order, and want to let off steam....., or because we have something to *learn* through being disorderly." (Brian Sutton-Smith in V.Turner 1982:28)

The first part of this quote could apply to the bodily catharsis of clubbing; the stripping away of the tensions and insecurities held within the physicality of participants. The second part suggests that people learn from experiencing the sensual liberation underpinned by this

“disorderly” body. We have seen that much of what they learn in clubs is related to the socio-sensual knowledge of Dionysus; much of that knowledge is about pleasure and people’s capacity to express themselves. Clubs offer an alternate space in which people can experiment with and explore their desires, their social personas, ways of interacting with others, which in normal sociality is held in check by the gaze and the logic of the everyday habitus.

This creative dimension is part of all clubbing, but it is only seized and taken further by some clubbers. An extreme example would be the relationship between parts of the rave/clubbing community and organisations like Reclaim the Streets, who have utilised the embodied intensity and social experience of clubbing to create a new form of mass party protest. Yet the majority of clubbers are not members of Reclaim the Streets; their clubbing experiences do not become the basis of mass political action. This does not mean that these experiences have no effect, just that their effects are manifested more as bodily and social techniques, which impact most strongly on the relationships people form in their everyday lives.

What comes out of the club experience is something more ethereal. Again it has analogies with the structure of ritual practice. Just as ritual grants meaning to social and cosmological systems then clubs can also grant a lived sense of meaningfulness to people’s worlds by creating a specific form of embodied engagement between self and world. This meaningfulness does not arise from one source or generate one shared perspective amongst clubbers. Rather it is created as people take their lived experience of the world, their sense of identity, their social and economic conditions and friendship networks into the social experience of clubbing and through that process create an experience which justifies their world to themselves at a corporeal and emotional level.

However, because of the anti-structural and Dionysian nature of the space this process of creating meaningful experiences through clubbing can, in itself, alter people’s relationship to the everyday world by throwing that world into relief. In so doing, as Sutton-Smith says, it offers a space out of which “new culture” can arise, but in contemporary metropolitan terms this “new culture” translates, not so much into large scale social movements or shared social identities, but rather into a new experience of self, that can open up that self to change, while suffusing the subsequent and often incremental process of change with the socio-sensual meaningfulness generated by the club experience itself. I believe that this process is an important and often missed element of clubbing, that is of particular interest when shifted back into the contemporary world, because clubbing gives us a new perspective upon how

humans grant their lives a sense of meaning by creating intense forms of socio-sensual attachment between themselves and their worlds.

Meaning in a Meaningless World

The sense of meaningfulness created by clubbing's practice predominantly exists as a sensual modality in the world rather than an ideological orientation. To fully understand its impact upon clubbers we must place it back into the social world out of which it arises. We have already examined some aspects of this relationship through an analysis of the clubbing gaze, the impact of the stranger dominated world of the city and the socio-sensual constraints lodged in the everyday habitus, all of which are altered through the practice of clubbing. In this section I want to examine the loss of both a sense of certainty and a sense of meaning at an ideological level, in the everyday world. As one informant commented:

“People have developed a healthy disrespect towards the old institutions; they see politics as sleazy; they don't believe in god; they feel like capitalism's corrupt and playing them for fools; they're losing their respect for authority.” (Male 34: 17 years experience.)

The perspective articulated above is a particularly concise version of a wider view that is best seen as a sense of disillusionment towards “old institutions”, that generates a certain confusion or uncertainty akin to a loss of faith in people's lives:

“There has been a massive shrinkage of space occupied by religious authorities in modernity. This has undermined the ability of societies to provide people with meaning systems which allow them to deal with death.” (Shilling 1993:180)

he continues by claiming that modernity has:

“Swept away ‘all traditional types of social order, in quite unprecedented fashion’. (Giddens 1990:4). High modernity has radicalized these changes even further in terms of the sheer pace of change, the scope of change and the nature of modern institutions. By undermining traditional meaning systems, the conditions of high modernity stimulate within people a heightened reflexivity about life, meaning and death.” (ibid.:181)

Shilling's assertion allows us to locate clubbing in a world in which problems of meaning have increased and become imbued with a “heightened reflexivity”. Clubbing is one of the fields of practice in which problems of meaning are being reconfigured, in such a way that, rather than remaining ideological or existential problems they become bodily negotiations with the world. The basic distinction I am making here is between meaning in the sense of

ideas, ideologies and language and meaningfulness, which arises from the emotional and embodied connections people make between themselves and their worlds. There is obviously an overlap between these two systems since ideological beliefs must be embodied if they are to gain any emotional force in the world. Yet as LeDoux explains:

“Connections from the emotional systems to the cognitive systems are stronger than connections from the cognitive systems to the emotional systems.” (LeDoux 1998:19)

This means that the process of embodying ideas will be more difficult if there is no emotional connection with those ideas. This is interesting in relation to the problem of meaning in the contemporary Western world. A whole meaning industry has been generated through consumer symbols, self-help books, new age spiritual beliefs, single-issue political movements and “self-care” regimes that in turn gives rise to a plethora of often conflicting ideological perspectives, themselves open to the vagaries of fashion. This confusing and often contradictory field of knowledge, and the rapidity with which it changes, undermines the process of embodying any of these ideological positions to the deep level required to make them postures in the world, which grants them a strong degree of sensual assurity that allows them to become taken for granted ideological orientations in the world.

In opposition to this ideological uncertainty we have the actuality of the lived body; the socio-sensual properties of which can be manipulated, through practice, to create lived points of connection between self and world that generate their own sense of meaningfulness. However, unlike the intense bodies of ritual, which grants meaning to pre-existing social and cosmological perspectives, the body of clubbing is lived as meaningful in relation to the constricted urbanised body through which people live their everyday lives. This meaningfulness is derived from the sense of being passionately alive which people experience in clubs and share with others as an alternate social form.

This sense of socio-sensual location in the world creates a particular co-ordinate within a person’s embodied map of their own passage through that world, that exists outside of the bodily constraints of the Apollonian habitus in terms of its lived intensity. However, as we have seen, this sensual co-ordinate must be brought into alignment with people’s other experiences of their world which form further co-ordinates in that sensual map. These alternate realms of practice are gradually woven together to create a meaningful sensual landscape, that provides an embodied backdrop out of which people’s perspective upon their own lived relationship to their world will arise.

Problems can arise for clubbers when clubbing is the only meaningful co-ordinate in that landscape. However, my informants had all created meaningful social worlds away from the club space, through their relationships, their work, the exploration of their desires and their creative practices, which were then intensified, celebrated and socially consolidated when they clubbed. Furthermore their clubbing practices had played an important role in restructuring these everyday experiences and relationships by expanding upon their socio-sensual parameters and also by making people think about what they actually wanted from them. For example in relation to work one informant suggested that:

“Having known the degree of pleasure that you can experience in this world; it changes the way you approach work.” (Male 32; 16 years experience.)

His own response to this change in perspective, which was shared by a number of my other informants, was to set up his own business which allowed his work to become more “creative”. He wanted to be able to express a least some portion of his own creativity and he was passionate about this creative aspect of his work. He was consciously attempting to suffuse his work life with at least a portion of the passionate, Dionysian intensity of the club space; to bring his work and leisure closer to one another in terms of how they felt and the satisfaction and enjoyment he gained from them. Obviously, not everyone can create their own business, but other informants suggested that they had managed to take some of what clubbing had given them into their work places in terms of creatively engaging with their jobs, the people they encountered and what they wanted those jobs to add to their lives. The basic mechanism at work is the attempt to bridge the gap between work and leisure; not so much as ideas but rather as alternate socio-sensual modalities. As one informant explained:

“Well money’s ceased to be the be all and end all of work for me, obviously I need enough to live on but I wouldn’t necessarily take a job that paid more money if I didn’t think that the people and the atmosphere would be all right, that’s more important than the money; after all you spend a long time at work, so I want to work somewhere that I can actually enjoy that time and I get on with the people I’m working with and work on things that I can get interested in and excited about.” (Female)

This shift in perspective upon work is not simply a product of clubbing. However, I would suggest that the wider social perspective, that “there must be something besides work”, arises out of a vague feeling of “staleness” that can be part of the highly controlled contemporary body. The perspective of clubbers comes from the other end of the physical spectrum, from within a body that has tasted the socio-sensual liberation of clubbing and they view work from the perspective of that experience. This body is imbued with a sense of

meaningfulness that is derived from having participated in the experience of clubbing. The results of either of these points of re-assessment may be similar i.e. a change in career, “downsizing”, self employment. The starting points that lead to these changes came from different directions. Regardless of where this change in perspective originated the final result is grounded in an attempt to create experiences which feel more meaningful and more personally fulfilling and so locate people in the world by shifting the co-ordinates of their socio-sensual landscape.

Chris Shilling (1993) asserts that the body has become a project in the modern world and I would expand upon this idea by suggesting that the body has become the site of meaningfulness in that world. People’s lived bodily practice generates and constrains their sense of both individual and social authenticity in the face of the contemporary world’s ideological confusion. The altered sensual parameters, discovered through the practices of clubbing, expand upon this process by opening up realms of socio-sensual experience, which feel more deeply embodied and authentic than other aspects of their lives. The subsequent sense of meaningfulness that people derive from these experiences is created from the “bottom-up” so that it suffuses participants flesh. In the process they create practices and bodies that anchor them in the world at a social and corporeal level and this point of anchorage offers a sense of social, sensual and emotional assurance in the face of the world’s ideological and symbolic confusion.

Bodies in minds, minds in bodies.

To place the above assertions into a neuro-cognitive framework we must return to the work of Damasio who asserts that consciousness arises out of the unconscious structure which he calls the proto-self, which is the mental schema of the body represented in mind. This bodily map is repeatedly altered as people encounter an on-going series of “objects” in the world. This proto-self is itself structured by the habitus of our society and so the way we encounter “objects” and the way those objects impact upon us emotionally has a strong social dimension.

Clubbing impacts upon people’s emotional memory. The memory of clubbing is not so much the memory of facts about clubbing, but rather an emotional modality that shapes people’s relationship to the world at an unconscious level. This is most simply illustrated by recourse to the work of French physician Edouard Clapereau. Clapereau was presented with a case of extreme amnesia; a patient that would completely forget who he was or having ever

met him before. On one visit to her, he approached her, held out his hand and as she took it she was pricked with a concealed pin. He then left the patient, when he returned she could not remember his name or ever having met him, but she would not shake his hand and backed away from him. Although she could not consciously remember him her previous response to being pricked by the pin remained as an emotional memory of their earlier encounter and this shaped her bodily and proxemic posture and emotional attitude towards him. LeDoux summarises this situation in these terms:

“It now seems that Claparede was seeing the operation of two different memory systems in his patient - one involved in forming memories of experiences and making those memories available for conscious recollection at some later time, and another operating outside of consciousness and controlling behaviour without explicit awareness of past learning.” (LeDoux 1998:181)

The actions of this amnesiac patient reveals this dual memory system, but we must be wary when applying the existence of these systems of gaining knowledge to clubbing. Clubbers have both types of memory system operating, although the high levels of intoxication found in clubs can make the memories of the explicit, conscious, system of recollection hard to recall, which brings to mind the old adage:

“If you can remember the 60s you weren’t really there.”

Just as the bodily techniques of clubbing can become embodied over time so too can the emotional memory of clubbing. The memory of clubbing is the emotional memory of having felt good and intensely alive; it is the smile that sweeps across the face of clubbers when you mention clubbing and drugging, even when they haven’t done it for a few years. It is the emotional surety of having done and shared something passionate with others in their lives, something that moved them beyond the socio-sensual and emotional constraints of the everyday world. Think of it as Claparede in reverse, rather than being pricked by the pins of others they are instead connected to those others by the club experience; this memory will have its most potent effects within people’s on-going club experiences because it was created within the context of the club space, but as we have seen part of its effects can still remain with people while away from the context of the club arena.

As Claparede shows this emotional memory generates unconscious effects and relationships to the world, which structures the way people encounter that world at an emotional level. This unconscious emotional reaction is important because as Oatley and Johnson Laird suggested emotions are “central to the organization of cognitive processing” because:

“Emotion signals provide a specific communication system which can invoke the actions of some processors [modules] and switch others off. It sets the whole system into an organized emotion mode without propositional data having to be evaluated by a high-level conscious operating system... The emotion signal simply propagates globally through the system to set it into one of a small number of emotion modes.” (Oatley and Johnson-Laird 1987: 33 in Cornelius 1996: 136)

There are a couple of problems with the above assertion. Firstly, neuroscience no longer accepts the mind is modular in the way they are referring to. Secondly, I would argue that the “particular states or modes” that emotion creates in body and mind are in themselves knowledge; they are the initial bodily structure of knowledge which will further structure our subsequent factual knowledge, because they carry within them both the structuring logic of practice and the emotional memory of people’s previous encounters with the “objects” of their world that, together, orientates their physical and emotional posture toward these “objects” via these unconscious bodily mechanisms.

Emotions connect us to the world at a visceral level; the emotional response we have to an “object” situates that “object” in our mind and imbues it with the sense of urgency and immediacy which will structure our reaction to it. It foregrounds the “object” and “flavours” our experience of it, by making it part of our body and hence part of the mind. As LeDoux suggests:

“Emotions easily bump mundane events out of awareness, but non emotional events... do not so easily displace emotions from the mental spotlight - wishing that anxiety or depression would go away is usually not enough.” (LeDoux 1998:19)

We always have an emotional connection to the world; the extent to which we experience an object in mind depends upon the emotional intensity which it invokes. Damasio also examines background emotions, which as he explains:

“A special word about background emotions is needed, at this point, because the label and the concept are not a part of traditional discussions on emotion. When we sense that a person is “tense” or “edgy,” “discouraged” or “enthusiastic,” “down” or “cheerful,” without a single word having been spoken to translate any of those possible states, we are detecting background emotions. We detect background emotions by subtle details of body posture, speed and contour of movements, minimal changes in the amount and speed of eye movements, and the degree of contraction of facial muscles.

The inducers of background emotions are usually internal. The process of regulating life itself can cause background emotions but so can continued processes of mental conflict, overt or covert, as they lead to sustained satisfaction or inhibition of drives and motivations.” (Damasio 1999:52)

Background emotions arise from both: the biological regulation of life and our ideas about the world, that is the way in which we mull it over in our minds and experience our relationship to it. These two processes are not separate because our ideas about the relationship we have with world are intimately linked to the practice of inhabiting it at a biological level. As Damasio points out this internal process of reflection is itself reflected upon the body; it becomes part of the body's "object" nature in the world that can be "read" by others. This is probably what is behind such statements as:

"You can spot a clubber-there's a definite recognition thing there and it's not just what they wear or anything, because I've met people, through work, that I thought clubbed and then found out I was right. I don't know there's something about them, you can recognise it. Big, sparkly inquisitive eyes, that look alive, the way they are with people, there's something." (Female 32; 9 years experience.)

I would suggest that this recognition was picking out some of the background emotions and bodily postures created by the practice of clubbing which people had embodied to the point that they utilised them within their everyday worlds. These bodily postures arise out of the emotional memory of clubbing. One major element of those memories is the sense of having lived. As one informant suggested:

"No-one wants to think that they live a boring life do they? Especially when you're young. I think that's one of the major appeals of clubs; they let you experience passion; you don't feel like life's boring when you're in a club and that experience is open to anyone with the money really. You can be really normal in other ways and still have a life that feels exciting, because you've got this hardcore playground to hang out in." (Male 27: 10 years experience.)

This sense that life is exciting becomes part of people's emotional memory in the world and subsequently part of the way people encounter the "objects" of that world. This embodied knowledge underlies the lived sense of meaningfulness I have been discussing and imbues people's identities with a Dionysian intensity; the life they are living isn't mundane or boring and furthermore the choices they have made to create that life are justified because their world feels passionate, adventurous and exhilarating, particularly its social dimension which is the most important emotional connection people can make between themselves and their world.

As Chris Shilling points out in relation to the "civilising process" suggested by Norbert Elias:

“Standards of body management demand that people monitor and control their bodies, yet the implication of this affect control is they become stale in and with their bodies.” (Shilling 1993:167)

Through clubbing people re-invigorate and repossess their bodies in a shared social arena they can cast off the “stale” body of their everyday world by creating passionate, liberated bodies that possess an alternate set of sensual, social and emotional co-ordinates. This aspect of clubbing isn’t totally reliant upon the sort of radical shift in perspective laid out in the quote from “*Altered States*” above, but when the two occur together then that shift in habitus is underpinned by the further deep sense of meaningfulness created by the practice of clubbing that strengthens the insights this alteration of the habitus offers.

This lived meaningfulness can position people in the world in an altered form where they become their own referent in that world. That is they judge their lives on how those lives feel rather than principally by their relationship to the systems of distinction, proscribed social trajectories and ideological perspectives found in the wider social world. In this sense they gain a certain autonomy from that wider social world because they create an embodied structure suffused with a sense of meaningfulness that can, at least temporarily, inure them from the everyday world’s disapproval of their activities.

However, the meaningfulness of practice must be sustained through practice if it is to remain embodied over time. Simple repetition though is not enough to maintain the power of this connection between self and world. The most destructive scenario arises from an over dependence on drugs to create this point of connection. The most constructive scenario arises from embodying the social practices and sensual parameters discovered through clubbing to the degree that they manifest themselves as a style of engagement with the world. At its most basic level this style of engagement is grounded upon an understanding of the importance of creating intense points of socio-sensual engagement with the world, in generating the lived sense of meaningfulness that we have been discussing. This intensity can arise from a range of practices, as one informant revealed when describing what she thought could ever replace clubbing in her life:

“There’s religion and dangerous sports. I can’t do religion, but I’m learning how to rock climb and that’s an interesting culture, there are lots of people I meet, who are clubbers and thrill seekers. A life without passion, a life of complete sedateness and normality, that would destroy me; I would rather be dead and buried as far as I’m concerned. So if anything replaces clubbing it would have to be passionate, some kind of extreme sport, or travelling, or real love, nothing else really appeals. I don’t want to end up just watching tele and going to work and filling my flat with things that just gather dust.” (Female 32; 9 years experience.)

This informant stresses the term passion and that passion is a sensuous modality in itself; a point of embodied meaningfulness grounded upon the construction of an especially participatory mode of sensual engagement with the world, which generates its own particular style of self knowledge. While it would be virtually impossible to generate this passion constantly clubbers understand that time must be set aside so that they can create and savour this realm of intense passion in whatever form it takes. Where clubbing differs from many other potential experiences of passionate connection between self and world arises from its social qualities; the radically altered bodies and minds of clubbers are shared with others and profoundly alter the way people relate to those others in the club space. This socio-sensual modality plays a huge role in generating the lived meaningfulness of clubbing; the passionate bodies of clubbing are expressive, social and communicative; they get to both experience and share their passion with others.

Conclusion

The socio-sensual practices of clubbing remain ideologically problematised from the perspective of Apollonian order, but feel intensely meaningful to participants as a sensual co-ordinate in their worlds. I want to return to Damasio's three tier model of consciousness to explain this disparity between ideology and meaningfulness. I would assert that the human sense of meaningfulness resides in the proto-self, that it is already part of the bodily pulse that manifests itself in "core-consciousness", which underpins people's "autobiographical consciousness". This sense of meaningfulness as a property of the body arises out of modes of participatory experience that generate points of emotional connection and investment in the world through bodily practice. Some human cultural practices will have ideological underpinnings but it is the practices that create the lived meaningfulness of those ideological positions by suffusing them with an embodied and emotional saliency. Other activities, such as clubbing, are reliant upon practices that have no firm ideological framework in the world. They are sensuous modalities created through particular ways of engaging with and occupying your world at a socio-sensual level, which then resonates within the sensual and emotional biography of participants and suffuses the higher levels of "core" and "autobiographical" consciousness with the lived sense of meaningfulness. The relationship between the proto-self and the higher levels of reflexive consciousness is based on "bottom-up processing" and because of the nature of the links between bodies and minds

this relationship is weighted on the side of the emotional and sensual body which links people to their world at a material and corporeal level, that generates the socio-sensual reality out of which consciousness arises.

The anti-structural world of clubs houses experiences that lie outside of the bodily constraints of the normative structure; they are more passionate, creative and electrifying than many of the experiences people have in the normative world. The popularity of clubbing reveals that people want to move beyond these constraints and they want to move beyond them in such a way that this shift in experience can be shared with others. As one informant explained:

“Clubbings quite an animal experience, quite carnal but in the best possible sense in that it’s physical and intense, but it’s the more positive side of that animal experience; it’s not violence; it’s just people trying to enjoy themselves and share that with other people.” (Male 34: 17 years experience.)

Obviously, the use of the term animal is loaded but the point this informant is trying to make is that humans can feel passionate, alive and freed from the constraining forces of propriety and the power of the gaze without that experience becoming anti-social. The ordered, rationalised body of the normative world is not seeking violence, but it is seeking a way of moving beyond the staleness of its everyday experience. Through the social medium of clubbing people have created a shared arena which allows this process to occur. Passion is reconfigured through the rationalised body of the contemporary world so that it can be separated from the social and bodily rules of the habitus without the abandonment of those rules leading to violence. As one informant explained:

“Clubbing made me conscious of etiquette and about how so much of my life is run by rules and what those rules are by allowing me to have a vacation from those rules, even if it’s only for a night. It’s changed me in the sense of what I view as entertainment and what I seek in entertainment. Had I been living in Shakespeare’s day then getting pissed and watching a couple of bears ripping each other apart would have been “Yes, top night out”, but I’m not interested in watching real violence anymore because clubs offer an experience that’s fucking intense, but it is so far removed from violence that violence starts to just look lame. Before drugs arrived then fucking or fighting were probably the most intense things a lot of people would experience, but then when drugs appeared people started to have fun in different ways and gradually the whole going out and having a laugh experience got more and more intense and violence just messes that up so people aren’t interested, while sex on the other hand expands on it and adds to it.” (Male 32; 14 Years experience)

Clubs in a way reflect the “civilising process” put forward by Elias, especially the reduction of violence, yet they are also an expansion of this process that moves beyond the bodily constraints upon which it was based. This shift in bodies generates its own sense of meaningful attachment to the world, but also creates alternate perspectives upon that world, which resonate within the everyday lives of clubbers. The basic core of this shift in perspective was summed up for me by an informant when I asked him what he thought the meaning of life was:

“The meaning of life, well I’d say that it lay somewhere between sociality and creativity; they’re the things that feel most meaningful to me anyway.”
(Male 31: 13 years experience.)

This is the meaningfulness of practice, of locating yourself in the world intensely, creatively and especially socially. In fact, from observing my informants, I would contend that one particularly important part of this altered clubbing perspective was an increased recognition of the importance of people, friends, family, lovers and even strangers in creating a sense of connection between self and world. The revitalisation of this primary social knowledge within the lives of clubbers stands in opposition to the “dog eat dog” sociality that dominates within contemporary capitalism. This is such a simple and important part of the clubbing process that it is easy to miss. We are supposed to value people but as we become more “individualised” to use Elias’ term, we can begin to treat them as obstacles to our own individuality and our own freedom. We focus on the way they constrain our lives rather than liberate them through their mutual support and consent. Clubbing can refresh the emotional presence of this positive social knowledge within the body by, as we have seen throughout this study, creating intense shared experiences that resonate in people’s social relationships and their wider social perspective upon their lived social world.

The informant above was not saying that clubbing alone could grant his world this sense of meaningfulness, but rather that being social and being creative, both inside and outside the club space, would provide experiences which could suffuse his life with meaning without the need for him to turn to any ideological framework. This meaning could only be sustained through an on-going process of participatory engagement that becomes a lived relationship between self and world. The shift in the socio-sensual parameters of experience achieved through the practices of clubbing underpins this relationship. People learn to live more like how they party. The party follows them back into their everyday world and becomes part of their posture in and attitude towards that world. A sensual grounding that is intense,

creative, playful, sensual and social, out of which arises the alternate perspectives and modes of participation through which clubbers can continue to construct meaningful worlds. This participatory style of engagement with the world was summed up by an informant who said:

“A lot of how we’re taught to live is basically Pavlovian; we’re taught to consume; too often we press the bell and things arrive without no real effort or thought on our part, but the best pleasures are hard won and challenging; you have to put a lot into them; simple consumption isn’t satisfying enough. Capitalism doesn’t deal with reality; it deals with future rewards and if you’re constantly striving for the future you can so easily forget about the reality of the present.” (Male 32:14 years experience.)

This allegiance to the present, to the day to day making of worlds, reflects a particular perspective upon time. With the death of God the notion that life will be rewarded with the carrot of eternity has collapsed. The only defence people have to the notion of death as “The End” is an increased determination to live passionately and intensely in the face of that death. As the quote above suggests simple consumption is not enough to generate this passion. It is part of the stale body of the everyday world which can at best produce momentary satisfactions through the fulfilment of consumer whims. Saving up to buy something special is somewhat different because people feel a sense of achievement, but that does not encompass much of people’s consumer activities which are often “Pavlovian” responses to the ever increasing realm of consumer goods. The very nature of this constantly shifting consumer realm precludes its ability to create a sense of contentment in people’s lives because, in order to sustain itself, it must constantly create new consumer “wants”.

Clubs offer an alternate realm of embodied experience that expands upon the socio-sensual parameters of the body and creates new perspectives upon such notions as sociality, pleasure, happiness, intimacy and personal expressivity, that, over time, becomes a lived form of sensual knowledge which people utilise in constructing and maintaining a sense of meaningfulness in their lives. This process is unfinished. The socio-sensual knowledge discovered through clubbing is still being assimilated by clubbers and that knowledge manifests itself in the everyday world gradually, as altered practices in and perspectives upon that world, rather than large scale resistance or revolutionary change. Nonetheless these socio-sensual shifts are, with some interesting cultural differences, becoming a global phenomena that has the power to alter people’s relationships to the taken-for-granted constraints of their own culture’s habitus. This sense of dislocation from the habituated past is then woven back into the fabric of the dominant culture. Its effects are incremental, rather

than explosive' because the dominant culture structures time, space, bodies and the "presentation of self" within the wider public sphere. Nevertheless, the socio-sensual knowledge discovered through clubbing can re-orientate people's perspective upon their lives; it can make people question their lives by allowing them to experience alternatives to the social practices which structure those lives. It is this process which imbues clubbing with the visceral power to become a potential source of new culture.

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Appendices

Arc: A Sex Party

This was a fund-raiser for a charitable organisation, an illicit night which involves making multiple phone calls to find the venue. We'd got our tickets in advance, but it still took a while to find the party. This particular night was spent with my woman K and friend M. The house it's based in is great, managing to be both exceptionally ugly, but wonderfully sleazy in a 1970s porn film sort of way. It's started raining outside and the kitchen roof is leaking badly. We drop a tiddle of ecstasy and M heads off to the loo to honk down a line of cocaine. He returns with that distinctive spring in his step.

This particular group have an Etiquette Code, which is applied at all their events. These are:

1. *Stewards are available to advise and help our guests to feel relaxed enough to be themselves, so have a chat.*
2. *Never touch or intrude upon someone uninvited and move on if asked.*
3. *Discreetly indicate to stewards any guests who behave disrespectfully to others, before any serious security problems arise.*
4. *Safe Sex - our stewards will happily supply you with a free condom if you're caught on the hop.*
5. *No swastikas or racist symbols - even as a kinky fetish; they cause serious misunderstanding and justifiable offence.*
6. *No Cameras and No press: This event is private.*
7. *No litter-please use the receptacles provided.*
8. *Be discreet in the neighbourhood when arriving and departing.*

The crowd is mixed: white, black, Asian, straight, gay, lesbian, bisexual, transsexual, transvestite, young, old and wheelchair users, all having a fine old time. We find ourselves some space in one of the dance rooms, which is fairly empty at this point in the proceeding; the carpet is an ageing shagpile, which makes dancing feel a little odd because your feet keep sticking to it. We neck some beers and then the three of us start to boogie, goofing off, celebrating the fact that we'd actually found the party. A few people join us, some familiar faces arrive, we start to relax.

It's time to head off for a nose around. The room next door is larger and has a sunken pit in the centre; this is the tantric sex / theatre room, the pit is a space where anyone, who chooses to obey the rules, can enter. The rule are displayed on the wall: *No Wanking, No Spunking, No Shoes*. People are in various states of undress, roll around stroking, caressing, kissing. It is all touchingly innocent and relaxed and the crowd round the edge chat, watch and smile.

There are four main room upstairs: one is for dancing, another for chilling out, the third is the dungeon and the fourth is the couples' room, which single people are not allowed to enter. Just off the chill-out room is the gay men's cupboard, a tiny little space which is packed fit to bust. We opt for some dancing; it's a latino rhythm and the room is packed. Two women in sequinned, stars and stripes, bikinis are grooving on down in a particularly saucy style. The E has connected and K, M and I flog our bodies with the beat. A rather irritating man who's dressed as a school teacher in cap and gown keeps trying to cane my butt, obviously over excited by my rather splendid sequinned frock, and I politely, but firmly, send him on his way. K's started chatting to a couple of woman; they're heavily tattooed and wearing tight, tight corsets and ultra high-heeled "fuck-me-pumps". They've got the giggles, because their heels mean that they can hardly stand, never mind walk, and their corsets won't let them sit down, but they're still having a good time, feeling sexy and happy. They're both in full time employment and this is the way they choose to spend their wages, hanging out with people who are "fun loving and laid back." I start talking to the guy sitting next to me who's completely naked, which seems totally normal in this space, even though most people are dressed. He's been coming to these parties for years and loves them, because they're so friendly and sexy. The event certainly has the social feel of a party in someone's home, a lot of people know each other already and it just doesn't feel like your surrounded by strangers.

We head off again, there is a lot of milling around, people shuffling past each other down corridors, a constant flow of human traffic, all seeking something, sex, companionship, fun, laughter, love. The atmosphere is starting to chill out, just like every other party this takes time. We come across "Diamond Lil's Incredible Cunt Show." It costs a pound and the money goes to the charity's war chest. I decide to give it a whirl; the show consists of a box, which has a magnified panel in the front, upon payment the curtains open and Lil's cunt is proudly displayed and magnified to tv screen proportions. She has a very pretty pussy and I do the only thing a gentleman should do when presented with such a sight: I cheer and whoop resoundingly, as Lil holds herself open for inspection. Cunts are so very beautiful. Lil pops her head over the box to see who's responding so well and then I get an encore for

my efforts. By the time the show has finished there is a queue lined up behind me. K's dissolved into giggles. I should have gone into PR.

M returns from checking out the dungeon; he's been such a naughty boy he had to be punished. We're dancing away again with a group. One woman wears a kitty suit, which is open across the breasts and crotch; the man accompanying her is in vivid lycra; an older guy, about 70, wanders past wearing a fetching rubber g-string. M is dancing with a woman who's wearing a tiny, white, see-through, baby-doll dress; he looks ever so happy. We sit down for a spliff; next to us a couple are kissing, then the woman's boyfriend appears and taps her on the shoulder, so he can grab a ciggie; the guys talk, while the woman searches her bag, they compliment the woman on her kissing skills, then she hands over the ciggy and, with a smile, her boyfriend wanders off leaving the couple to continue.

Over the other side of the room another couple are getting passionate. He's looking sharp in Armani; she's looking like a gloriously pornographic Barbie doll, with bottle blonde hair, steel tipped heels and crotchless rubber shorts. She sits astride his rather large cock, fucking him like a freight train on heat, while his eyes flicker into the back of his head and his hands encircle her breasts. Around them people are talking and chatting away, a few people watch and enjoy, everyone else just lets them get on with it without batting an eyelid. They continue for maybe fifteen minutes and then she rolls off him; he hasn't ejaculated and he just pops his willy away and they head off to get a drink, looking relaxed and reinvigorated..

There is a moments commotion around the theatre pit, as one participant tries to get in without taking their shoes off. The hippy in the fishnet body suit, who seems to be in charge of this particular slice of space, stops his drumming and demands the person leave the pit, there's some muttering, but the interloper is eventually ejected. The rules laid down in the party charter provide a set of boundaries, within which people can interact; the sexual content of the space can leave people feeling a bit freaked, so it's important to create a model of social interaction that they can hold on to and through which they can engage with others. The most important rule is obviously consent and the right to refuse, or stop what's happening at any point, is continuously stressed within the organisers literature. This is particularly important in a sexual arena, where people can get over excited if they're not use to such spaces.

We end up in the chill-out room, skinning up, gabbing away. The DJ's naked. This is a gentle room, as chill-out spaces tend to be, the music is soothing rather than frenetic, everybody looks stoned out of their gourds. We decide it's a little too laid back and head out

to the action. At the top of the stairs we pass the white, baby-doll woman, who beams at us and waves. She has two boys licking a breast each, while another guy kneels in front of her stroking her panty clad pussy and running his tongue along her thighs. She says one word “lovely”, as we walk by, her smile is a colossal, beaming testament to the pleasures of the flesh.

The dungeon’s busy; two women, clad in expensive lingerie, are using one of the whipping posts. One stands legs astride, while the other deftly crops her cunt and thighs, producing moans of pleasure. They look beautiful. In the corner a more intense scene is going down, a woman is caged, with a piece of leather strap loosely wrapped round her throat, she’s sitting on a guy’s lap and a crowd has gathered. Her boyfriend and top is controlling the proceedings with skill. The mixed crowd have their hands pushed through the bars, covering her body, stretching her nipples, running over her pussy and legs, exploring her ass, while she groans and cries out for more. Her eyes have rolled into the back of her head, sweat is pouring from her and the recognisable rush of an orgasm flickers across her musculature. She’s revelling in the attention, fantasy has become reality, and her passion is radioactive, charging the space with a sizzling, sexual buzz.

Most of the actual sex at this event took place in either the gay men’s cupboard or the couples’ room. The couples’ space looks a little daunting, a darkened room policed by one of the party’s stewards to ensure that single people can’t enter. Inside though it’s relaxed, people are stretched out on cushions, it’s languorous and lush, as the dressed up punters snake their bodies around one another. Most of the action is one on one, with the occasional threesome and foursome. We just sit there for a while, a bit shy, but the infectious seductive charge of the space is drawing us in kindling our passion, while simultaneously relaxing us, making us feel less self-conscious. The guy next to us licks his wife’s asshole, while she roots in her handbag for lube and condoms. A woman in a wild red hat and stockings gently dildo fucks herself, putting on a show for her wheelchair using partner. Hands wander up skirts and into waistbands. A lascivious mambo of desiring bodies getting off on themselves and the presence of others. I’m getting my cock sucked; it’s hot, giggly fun and I relax into it, savouring the visibility, letting my eyes wander to catch glimpses of faces burning with passion, invigorated by the charge of sexual tension and the amiable glow of fulfilment. It’s honey sweet and whisky warm.

Downstairs the theatre has stopped and people are just hanging out talking, laughing, joking. In the corner of the room a transvestite is sucking the foot of a leather clad dominatrix, who’s drinking champagne. The toe sucker is writhing like a playful kitten,

obviously turned on, the dom woman is keeping her composure and being cool until, with a flick of her foot, she sends the transvestite on his way . He thanks her and leaves the room, presumably searching for more perfectly manicured feet. Everyone looks so laid back and charming, this is a truly tolerant space. I get one of those rushes, which have occurred throughout the fieldwork period, whether on drugs or not, this is human beings at their very best, creating a social space which is gentle, supportive, and happy.

We eventually crawl out at about 8.00 am; the three of us are feeling groovy and we end up lounging around in the living room, smoking weed, swapping tales and laughing until 11 am, when we eventually tumble into our beds, exhausted, but happy. Just like after a days hard physical labour, a night of intense clubbing makes you feel like you've worked to achieve something. Its presence whispers in your flesh a gentle reminder that, at least for a few hours, you have stepped beyond the mundane.

Notes On The Video

The video is split into four sections, to be viewed in conjunction with the relevant text.

Aesthetics

The images seen here were captured at Air/Swaraj, Audio Sutra, and Stoned Asia which were part of the Asian influenced club circuit. The rest are from the new Blue Note. Similar visual and aesthetic techniques were utilised in a number of other clubs I visited. The blending of slides, film clips and lights adds to the kinaesthetic feel of the space and suffuses it with the seductive allure of darkness, colour and motion which marks the club space out, in visual terms, from the majority of other public spaces. I would argue that these aesthetic effects are both emotive and sensuous and they play an important role in shifting the sensual parameters through which people engage with the club space and their fellow clubbers.

Dance

Capturing the feeling of dancing is difficult. Some of the most minimal and slow moving dancers I encountered were also the most passionate when talking about how dancing made them feel. This clip starts with an example of starting a dance floor, in this case at Regimes. Also notice the way in which people behave on the dancefloor sometimes internalising their dancing, at others sharing it with the people surrounding them. Note the incident where the guy in the Rumba shirt catches a woman with his cigarette the apology is immediate, she even smiles, this would have almost certainly been an excuse for a fight in the pre-rave days of clubbing. Notice too, the look of complete immersion on many people's faces, their euphoria and the sense of bodily liberation which these clips capture. Note how shifting from colour vision to night vision recontextualises people's dancing by pulling them from the darkness which surrounds them. This shift captures the physical freedom experienced on the dancefloor, where people abandon much of their self-consciousness and move in ways that would cause consternation in other public spaces.

Dressing Up

These clips were taken from Regimes and Club Kitten. Regimes was an extreme dress up night but I witnessed a similar level of dressing up in other clubs particularly on the fetish scene. Note the inventiveness of many of the outfits, the playfulness with which they are worn and the look of the crowd as a whole. When everyone makes an effort no one really stands out. This was not a night about fashion but about creative self expression.

The Vibe

It is again extremely difficult to capture the vibe of a club and I have focused upon the smaller interactions and forms of communication which predominate in the club space. These small points of connection between people are vital and they spread out across the crowd over the course of a successful night. The way people talk is also important and the constant chatter of animated voices is a part of any club night. These video clips also allow you to hear some of the music of clubbing, note the variety of “tunes” and the passionate response they tease from the crowd.

Glossary

All-Back-To-Mine: A post club get together at a fellow party goers house.

Asian Beats: Dance music which blends Asian and Western musical styles.

Bass-Bins: Big powerful bass speakers.

Ballistic: Intense, Passionate.

Big-Looks: Extreme dressing up.

Bliss: Blissed-Out, Blissed-Up: State of extreme happiness, contentment and immersion into the world, a peak experience often associated with dancing while on drugs.

Blistered: Used to describe the effects of taking too much amphetamine, a state of agitation and tension.

Boogie, Boogie on Down: Dancing

Booty, Shake your Booty: Term for someone's bottom, also sexual slang, term for dancing.

Buzz: Used to describe the sense of sociality and excitement which suffuses a club.

Cane, Caned, Caning it: Taking a great deal of drugs over an extended period of time.

Chilled-Out, Chill Out: Relaxed but not slumped, calm, contemplative at ease.

Cheese Beats: Kitsch Tunes.

Clangers: A happy family of woollen puppets who live on a faraway planet, they dance, eat soup and gain wisdom from a metal chicken..

Cock-Strap: Leather straps worn around the base of the penis and scrotum, highly recommended.

Coke, Coked Up: Term for cocaine and being under the influence of cocaine.

Comedown: When the effects of the intoxicants sadly start to wear off.

Come-on: An attempt at seduction, signalling sexual interest.

Coming-Up: The transition from sobriety to a state of ecstasy or LSD intoxication.

Cut a Rug: Dance.

Crashed: Had enough, slumped, asleep.

Crinny: Crinoline Dress

Crustie: Traveller, free spirit, fond of dogs.

Deadheaded: Unimaginative, scared, suspicious.

Disco-Napping: Falling asleep for a brief part of the party, then waking up and starting again.

Dissed: Insulted.

Dominatrix, Dom: A woman who wields the whip in an S&M relationship.

Don't Give a Monkeys: Unconcerned.

Double-Barrels: Simultaneous vaginal and anal penetration.

Drag-Queen: Big theatrical transvestite.

Drum and Bass: Dance music, originally **Jungle**, heavy bass, multiple drum riffs and rhythms.

Dub: Style of music often with a heavy bass line that existed before clubbing in its contemporary form, often associated with Rastafarian Culture.

Dungeon: Space in Fetish clubs set aside for S&M play.

Ecstasy: Methylenedioxymethamphetamine, M.D.M.A. Drug with strong euphoric effects.

Flog, Flog your body: In this usage the passionate bodily participation in dance.

Freaked-Out: Upset, confused.

Fried: Exhausted, not thinking straight.

Fuck-Me-Pumps: High heeled very stylish and sexy shoes, look great often hurt like hell to wear.

Funk, Funky: Musical style, something good, interesting, enjoyable.

Gabba: Dutch term for intense fast techno.

Gab: Informal chatting.

Gagging For It: An intense desire to party, have sex, enjoy yourself.

Garage: Musical style, two-step beat, also **Speed-Garage** very different style fast relentless beats.

Givin' it Some/Vent: A high degree of participation, not holding back.

Gob-Smacking Grin: A huge Smile.

Goofing Off: Playful behaviour.

Gurning: Ecstasy users can grind their teeth as tension concentrates in the jaw, looks like they are pulling faces, not an altogether attractive look.

Gwaney: Dance style originaly Jamaican, very sexy.

Hardcore: Extreme.

Heavyweight: Someone who parties long and hard.

Heebie-Jeebies: Panic, paranoia, unease.

Hip-Hop: Black American musical style and lifestyle with its own codes of honour and respect also associated with graffiti art, lyrical poetry and linguistic dexterity.

Honk, Honk-Down: Snorting drugs especially cocaine and ecstasy.

House: Musical style, euphoric, ecstasy inspired dance music, also Hard House and Handbag House.

Kick-Back: In this usage relaxed, also a bribe.

Kitty-Suit: Cat Costume.

Jungle: Black British musical style, pre-cursor of Drum and Bass.

Knackered: Tired.

Lagging, Getting lagging: On the lager with your mates.

Large, Living it Large, Largin'it: Enjoying the good times, expansiveness, moving beyond the mundane.

Lightweight: Someone who finishes partying early, can't handle their drugs.

Loon: Lunatic.

Look: As in having a Look, a very individual style of dressing.

Losing it, Lost the Plot: Confusion caused by over intoxication.

Love Librarians: Glamorous, bespectacled, sexy women.

Luvved Up: Friendly, passionate, gentle loving feelings associated with ecstasy use.

Mashed: Heavy intoxication.

Max: Maximum, the limit, all the way.

M.C: Master of Ceremonies, D.J, Rapper.

Media-Flu: Monday morning hangover especially associated with the media's use of cocaine.

Messy: Out of control, losing your dignity, being sick.

Mosh-it-Up: Go wild, get intoxicated.

Mr Droopy: A flaccid penis.

Mullered: Extreme state of intoxication. Not always negative.

Naughty: In this usage engaging in activities that the everyday world may disapprove of but which people enjoy.

Neck: Drink, Swallow.

Nose Around: See what's going on.

Nutted: Intoxicated, free from worries.

On-One: Taking a tablet of ecstasy, also enthusiasm, enjoyment.

Out of It: Freed from worries, relaxed body, stripped of petty concerns, also heavily intoxicated.

Out like a Trout, Out of Your Box, Out Yer Gourd: Intoxicated.

Party-Animal: Someone who loves to party and parties hard.

Party-Pooper: Someone who resolutely refuses to have a good time.

Party-Liability: Someone who spoils other people's nights.

Pear-Shaped: When things go wrong, derived from a particular body shape.

Pill, Pilled Up: Ecstasy tablet, having taken ecstasy.

Pissed: Drunk.

Posse, Party-Posse: Group of friends who party together.

Prime-Love: Penis.

Puke: Vomit.

Pulling, On the Pull: Finding a sexual partner, trying to find a sexual partner.

Punters: The people who make up the club crowd.

Rice n Bass: Asian influenced drum and bass, light-hearted term.

Rumpy-Pumpy: Sex.

Rush, Feel the Rush: The sensation of coming up on drugs, also excitement.

S&M: sadomasochistic sexual practices.

Scagging Around: Listless and unglamorous behaviour.

Shagging: Engaging in vigorous sex.

Shapeless Casuals: Well worn in old clothes, worn only for comfort, style free zone.

Shitfaced: Intoxicated, not always negative.

Skanking: Dance style, associated with Dub, laid back, stoned way of moving.

Skunk, Skunkweed: Very potent marijuana.

Sound-Clash: Two sound systems battling for musical supremacy.

Speeding: Under the influence of amphetamine.

Splattered, Splattered out yer conch: Highly intoxicated sometimes positive.

Spliff: Marijuana. A drug cigarette.

Strutting, Strutting the goods: Being visible and on display.

Sub-Bass: An modern acoustic technique for amplifying and enhancing the visceral force of a bass beat.

Super-Facial: Animated and expressive body language.

Techno: Music, heavily electronic, fast repetitive beats.

Tiddle: A small amount.

Top: Someone who controls an S&M scene.

Trance: Music with “New Age” psychedelic influences, repetitive beats, so that people can trance-out and reach states of bliss.

Tranny: Transvestite.

Trip, Trippy, Tripped Out: Pertaining to LSD, also metaphorical for something reminiscent of the LSD experience, often visual.

Trolleyed: Highly Intoxicated.

Toad-Licking-Crustie: Derogatory, someone who’s taken too many drugs, reference to imbibing the psychedelic bodily excretions of some amphibians.

Touchy-Feely: The way people touch each other and relate to each other on ecstasy, relaxed, gentle, social interactions.

Tunes: Music.

Up For It: Ready and eager to party.

Wasted: Over intoxicated, tired.

Weed: Marijuana.

Whizz: Amphetamine, Also **Billy-Whizz** after a Beano character who could move very quickly.